Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee:	Dr. Ekwueme Michael Thelwell
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Interviewer:	Emilye Crosby
Videographer:	John Bishop
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Emilye Crosby: I'm Emilye Crosby with the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and I am conducting this oral history as part of the Civil Rights History Project, sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of [African] American History and Culture and the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress. Today is August twenty-third, 2013 and we are with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell at his home in Pelham, Massachusetts this morning. And I'm here with John Bishop, who is the videographer. Thank you, Professor Thelwell, for doing the interview with us.

Ekwueme Thelwell: Thank you, Professor Crosby. I am happy to do this interview, and I can't think of an interviewer I'd be happier to do it with than yourself.

EC: You do me honor, sir. [Laughs]

ET: I am a humble servant of the truth, Professor, a humble servant of the truth.

EC: Can you tell us about your family and growing up in Jamaica?

ET: Yes I could.

EC: Would you?

ET: If it's really necessary. My father as a young man came to the United States and spent some considerable time there and was quite a legend. As I walked through New York, through Harlem people would say, "You're his son, you're his son! And they'd tell me stories about my father." He was a very dramatic figure. He had a deep, booming laugh, and obvious love of people. He was six foot four, 240 pounds, which in that day and age made him a giant, though he was built like a professional football linebacker today. In this country he was a motorcycle racer. Motorcycles were big back in the '30s and '40s. And a trick rider. He went back to Jamaica, entered politics, was elected in his constituency. He was very, very popular with the people because he was generous and kind. And people said if he hadn't died at the age of 44 he probably would have been prime minister of the country. And there was much speculation that his death was a result of political conspiracies and wickedness, which is the way people tended to think.

My mother was an amazing woman because she brought me, the three of us up, after my father died. Intestate, so a lot of his property was hung up in all kinds of litigation and bureaucracy. And she raised three children, sent us to the best school in the country. My brother became an engineer, went to the University of Michigan on an athletic scholarship. And he was six foot five and very black. And he was an excellent athlete. He represented the country in track and field when still a high school boy. He played on the national soccer team when still a high school student. And my mother, who was imperious—having been told that such a thing as athletic scholarships existed, she

collected all his clippings, flew to this country, went to the University of Michigan, walked into the athletic director's office with all these clippings. I'm trying to remember the guy's name. And when she walked out my brother had a scholarship.

John Bishop: Can we pause for a sec?

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

JB: Ok, we're back on.

ET: I'm trying to remember his name. It will give some verisimilitude to the story if I can remember the guy's name.

Anyway, so my brother arrives here. And he was running track for Michigan. That lasted one year. Didn't last as long as a year. Because the academic advisors to the athletic department told him he should major in Physical Education and become a coach. I mean, here you had this big black guy with a Jamaican accent. Obviously, Phys. Ed. is the major, and you should become— He said, "No, you must be out of your mind. I came here to be a civil engineer." They said, "Oh, no, no. You've got to major in Physical Education. You can't handle civil engineering." So he told them to kiss his behind and gave them back the scholarship, and stopped competing and worked his way through Michigan. And five years later, [00:05:00] he graduated with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering, a master's degree in sanitary engineering, and another master's degree in environmental engineering. So that's the story of my family.

EC: And I don't suppose the athletic department had any regrets over their advising program.

ET: They should have, because he was a hell of a hurdler. Olympic-class hurdler. In fact, I have a picture of him as a freshman. Must have been the first hurdle because

they are all dead even, going over the hurdles. And the two guys he were running against—goddamn, I'm reaching an age where— You can edit this, right? Names. They were his main competitors, both of them from Michigan State. Maybe one of them was from Ohio. Herb Adderley was one, who went on to become an All-Pro, I think Hall of Fame defensive back in the National Football League. Herb Adderley was one, and Lem Barney was the other. And there in the middle of them was my brother, hitting the first hurdle. I've lost that picture.

EC: Was he an older brother or younger?

ET: So my brother went to Michigan and as I said, departed, broke his status with the athletic department because he wasn't about to major in Phys. Ed. But I do have this great picture of him as a freshman running against two seniors. They were dead even so it had to have been the first hurdle. And on one side of him is Lem Barney, who went on to great fame in the National Football League. And on the other side of him is Herb Adderley, who also went on to become a first-rate defensive back and maybe a Hall of Famer. And there's my 18 year-old brother right in the middle of them running like hell.

EC: Did he miss it? Did he have any regrets about walking away from the athletics?

ET: He never expressed any, but I can't see how he couldn't have.

EC: Was he an older brother or a younger?

ET: Younger brother. Actually, his story is really interesting because he was three months premature. He was born at six months and only weighed two-and-a-half pounds. So some members of the family are looking at this little creature, saying, "He ain't never going to live. Throw him away. Dash him away." But my mother fed him with an

eyedropper, from one of those little medicine bottles, that's how she fed him. And he not only survived this three-and-a-half pound birth weight but he grew to six foot five and was probably the most phenomenal schoolboy athlete the country ever produced. As an excellent environmental engineer he went back and set up for the government, for the department of environmental resources and conservation in the Jamaican government, and was a consultant to the United Nations in that field, until he prematurely died at the age of about 60.

EC: When you came to this country did you have much sense of the Civil Rights Movement? Was that something you were thinking about at the time?

ET: I had some sense of the racial circumstances in the country. And I had a deep-seated dread of the South. One of the books that I had read in high school was John Oliver Killens's *Youngblood,* which is a very powerful book. It had such an effect on me. And also the kind of romances of—who was this black guy who used to write all these romances, *The Foxes of Harrow*? Frank Yerby. So I had a serious fear and dread of the South. The first time I went to Louisiana and saw, what are those mosses? Spanish Mosses that grow on the trees. My heart fell and I became petrified with fear, just the image of the Spanish Moss. And the other sense of the South I got from Faulkner, and then in addition to which, I got to the United States, got to Howard University [00:10:00] in September 1959. And in the spring of 1960, the student Freedom Rides happened. So I've often claimed that I arrived in this country and touched off the student movement in the South. [Laughter] My arrival touched it off.

EC: It does look like it, doesn't it?

ET: Though people have tended to contest that. Ill-advised people. Misguided

people have tended to contest that.

EC: It seemed obvious. You arrived, it started. Right?

ET: Precisely.

EC: How did you come to Howard?

ET: The sequential fallacy, as they say. How did I come to Howard? I'd rather not say. Okay. My formal answer to that question is, I wanted to go to a black school so I could be immersed in black culture and develop an African American perspective on the world. That's my official position. The real position was, I was working for the Jamaican Industrial Corporation and a young economist came in. He had a master's degree in Economics from Howard University. Cameron Payne. He was very elegant, a very dark guy. Spoke in a very affected way. And naturally I gravitated to him because here is this genuine intellectual, a black mind. And he said to me, "You've got to go to Howard University in Washington, D.C. There are nine women for every man, and every male student at Howard has at least three or four girlfriends at the same time." I said, "That's all I want to know." That's the real reason I went to Howard.

EC: You needed those odds?

ET: I beg pardon?

EC: I said, you needed those odds? [Laughs]

ET: No, I didn't think I needed them but they wouldn't hurt!

EC: Not going to turn them down, right?

ET: Yeah. There is an Igbo proverb which says, only the fool spits out the tender morsel that a kind god places between his lips.

EC: And you weren't that kind of fool.

ET: No, ma'am. I've been called everything but a child of God and a Republican. Ain't nobody ever called me a fool.

EC: So what was Howard like for you? What was it like to—

ET: Amazing. I mean, that is the best decision anybody ever made for the wrong reasons. You know, anything people want to know about the student experience at Howard, they can read in [Stokely] Carmichael's book, *Ready for Revolution.* He was at Howard with us, as was Courtland Cox, as was Charlie Cobb. There was a whole host of us in SNCC who came through Howard, and that's not accidental.

The first thing is, Howard was very strategically placed. Being in the nation's capital, and as you know, the only federally supported black institution in the country, which created interesting political problems, because the people who controlled the Howard University budget were also congressmen. All Dixiecrats, all white supremacists and segregationists. So that, for example, in the four years I was there, and a member of NAG [Nonviolent Action Group], NAG was never a recognized student organization. The NAACP was a recognized student organization. The French Club was a recognized student organization. The German Club was a recognized student organization. But NAG was not and we found that very distressing.

But it turns out President Mordecai Johnson and later President Nabrit [James A. Nabrit, Jr.] knew exactly what they were doing. So when they went to get their budgets from Congress and people said, "All them young Negroes running around the place being so disruptive. Can you control them?" They said, "But, Mr. Congressman, Mr. Senator, I have scrutinized the student organizations at Howard University very carefully. There is no Nonviolent Action Group there, sir. Such an organization doesn't exist as far as our

records show. My must be young people from Georgetown and George Washington and those other schools.

EC: [Laughs] As if.

ET: It gave us an excellent issue around which to organize, because every year we mounted a large campaign to get NAG recognized and in my own case, I wasn't even aware of the strategy of protecting us that the university presidents were doing. So we thought it was an expression of Howard backwardness and reactionariness, that they wouldn't recognize us. And we struggled. And even students who weren't very politically active, the bourgeois fraternity, the Greek lettered students, were on our side, saying, "How come this Nonviolent Active Group isn't recognized." [00:15:00] They would turn out and demonstrate in our favor. The student government would make statements about our being recognized. But the university held very firm, and we were never recognized, so we didn't formally and officially exist.

EC: At what point did you understand what they were doing?

ET: Long after I left. But I was astute enough to be grateful for the issue to organize around. We could get the school year started with a political confrontation with the administration.

EC: And draw people into the organization.

ET: Right. Precisely. You need an issue to organize around.

EC: So NAG seems like one of the strongest of the student groups that was a SNCC affiliate, at least over a long period of time. Do you think that's accurate?

ET: Well, that depends on what you mean by strong. First of all, Howard University attracted students from all over the country and all over the world. It was very

centrally placed. Part of the reason we organized NAG was that once the student sit-ins in the South started, we took the position that, "Look. We are here in the nation's capital. We have a moral and a political obligation to support our brothers and sisters in the South. Therefore the seat of government is here, the White House is here, the Capitol is here, we can have demonstrations here to put pressure on these Southerners. And it is our duty and our responsibility to do it." Then there was segregation in Maryland, there was segregation in Virginia. So you could drive out of the District of Columbia and have bona fide sit-ins. So it would be a failure of our responsibility to history if the students at Howard were inactive in that way. That's number one.

Number two, there were professors there—unfortunately there was a historian whose name I'm not going to remember—who gave us very contemporary readings, political readings. And there was a level of instruction around certain of the faculty there that was very focused on social issues, and very focused on educating us as to the state of the world. And in addition to which a healthy percentage of the African American students came out of the South. For example, there was Cleve Sellers, who came from South Carolina into NAG. And Cleve was sent to Howard by his parents because white folks had warned them in the community that if he continued agitating the way he was agitating, he was probably going to come to a very bad end. So they sent him out to Howard to safety and the first thing he does is jump off the bus and joins NAG and comes back down South.

And that was also true of Hank Thomas, Henry Thomas. Henry Thomas came from Fort Augustine [St. Augustine], Florida, and he maintained a constant protest against the discrimination and apartheid that surrounded them there. As a matter of fact, a

friend of his in the department, Playthell Benjamin, said he and Hank were very close growing up and Hank was so principled, he said the only entertainment we had in Fort Augustine [St. Augustine] was to go to the movies on a Saturday. But we had to sit up in the crow's nest, in the segregated area. And he said from the time Hank was about 14 years old 'til he left high school he refused to go, because he refused to pay his money and be discriminated against. That's the kind of principle he had. And he was a big, burly guy. Still is tall, big. And had a scholarship to play defensive end, I believe, at the University of Wisconsin. And instead, he came to Howard, worked in the cafeteria, didn't have any scholarship, didn't play ball, and joined in the movement.

There was a mixture of young people at Howard, some of them from the Deep South. Laverne. I will never forget him. He was in the room next door to me. He was from Birmingham. He was a short, wiry little black guy who was a veteran. And he was the first one who told me about conditions in the deep South. I'm going to stop right here for a minute.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

JB: We're rolling again.

ET: Alright, I was a freshman just off the plane and I used to talk to Laverne. See, you felt like a bond with my brother. "Tell me about it." And he educated me. He told me about Tuskegee. He told me, he said, "Man, them niggers at Tuskegee," [00:20:00] he said. "They're making good money. They're professors so they have new cars. But when they leave Tuskegee and go into the rural areas, they put on a chauffeur's hat to drive their cars through because a nigger in a good car is going to have a heap of trouble from them crackers." I said, "Good God almighty." He said, "Oh, yeah, man. They all carry

their chauffeur's hat with them so they look like they're driving white folks' cars."

Then he said, "We got a police chief." Now, this is 1959. September, right? So it predates it. And, "Man, he a mean cracker." I say, "Yeah, what's his name?" He said, "Bull." I said, "What's his name?" "Bull. And he only got one eye. They say some nigger took his eye out in a fight. And he do hate black people." I said, "What's his name?" He said, "Bull. Bull Connor." 1963, I would discover who he was talking about. And a lot of other stories he told me like that really educated me and terrified me. And he also taught me something about the educational policies of the South, because I didn't have much money.

If you want to see cultural shock and trauma, is the first time that students from the Caribbean go into the cafeteria. Now, the prices in the Howard cafeteria were dirt cheap by American standards. When I saw them I said, "Man, did you see what it costs me for breakfast? It costs me $1.50." A dollar fifty in Jamaican currency was what you'd eat on for a week, you know? So I had to learn to cook very quickly. So I was very broke. My father was dead. My mother didn't have much money, though she sent me a regular stipend every month, which required some sacrifice for her. I translated it into $30 a month. [Laughter] She sent it every month. So I had to find different things to do. I used to cut hair in the dorm and the head of the dorm came up and told me that the barber's union in Washington, D.C. had heard about it and was taking steps to have me stopped. And for a while I believed him! Then I said, "They got to send their lawyers, because I got to eat."

Oh. We were talking about Laverne. Once in a while he would come and say, "Mike, you look hungry. I am going to buy you a steak." And we'd go up to the grill and

he'd buy me this t-bone steak that costs I think $2.50, which is a hell of an expenditure for one meal. And he says, "Mike, enjoy your steak. The great state of Alabama gives it to you with their compliments." I said, "What are you talking about, Laverne?" He said, "Look, man, them crackers don't want us to go to their lily-white schools so they pay me money to go to school out of state." So he had both his stuff from the military and the stipend from the state of Alabama, which gave me a steak once a month.

EC: So you're grateful to the state of Alabama?

ET: Undying gratitude. Permanent and undying gratitude. Don't say that nobody ever benefitted slightly from racism. And sometimes Laverne would buy me two steaks: "Have another one, Mike. You still look hungry. On the state of Alabama."

EC: And you did your best to pay back the state of Alabama, right?

ET: I thought I owed it to them. The other aspect at Howard. We had professors like—you got to pause, I got to remember their names. Well, there was Sterling Brown. Then there was that historian who had freckles who worked with Dr. Du Bois a lot.

EC: It wasn't Frazier? There were a couple historians—

ET: Franklin Frazier was a sociologist.

EC: A sociologist, yeah. I think I know who you're talking about but I'm not remember either.

ET: You know what I'm talking about. Look if there's an entry there that says "Howard Faculty." Look under Howard University, see what it says.

JB: [00:25:00] Should I pause for a second?

ET: Yeah, please.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

What's the word that means—?

EC: Nadir?

ET: Nadir, right. You know who I mean?

EC: I know who you mean, I'm just not remembering it either. I'll remember it later; we probably both will.

ET: Well, okay. As a consequence of segregation, some truly excellent and politically active, like Professor Eugene Holmes, for example, who when the HUAC summoned him to ask, "What is your profession?" He said, "Sir, I am a hired thinker. What is yours?" And Eugene Holmes was good friends, or so he claimed, with Bertrand Russell. So on occasion, he'd come to class, he'd say, "Oh, I had a letter from Bertie today." There was a host of professors, historians, and like Sterling Brown in literature and stuff like that, who in today's academic climate, if they didn't have the consciousness to stay at a black school, would probably be at one of the elite privates, Ivy League institutions, and be celebrated. But these guys stayed at Howard. E. Franklin Frazier, the sociologist and a host of people like that. So we had that exposure, and they had certain programs. Reading programs and discussion programs to really make sure that we got a social and political education. Not brainwashing, but in a sense— What they were really bestowing was a sense of the necessity for social responsibility on the part of young people. And those students who were attuned to that gravitated to that and soaked it up.

Carmichael talks about it at some considerable length in his book. So there were people like Courtland Cox, Charlie Cobb, myself, Stokely Carmichael, Muriel Tillinghast. A really brilliant young mind who was head of the student government when I got there, a Philadelphia Negro who became a lawyer. And a Republican! Who am I

talking about?

EC: Tim Jenkins?

ET: Tim Jenkins. A very brilliant young man, Tim Jenkins, who was head of the student union when I got there, student government. I had gotten there and I truly wasn't impressed with the quality of the bureaucrats who filled up the place. And when the head of the dorms talked to us I thought he was talking to us like we were schoolchildren. And when the Dean of Students spoke to us I thought he was an imbecile. And at this great orientation meeting, up gets Tim Jenkins, the head of the student government. And the most articulate, the most politically clear, the most mature speech that was made in that congregation was made by the head of the student government. So Tim Jenkins immediately had a big fan in me. And he was a guy who worked to set up the orientation session for SNCC when SNCC got started and entered into the establishment. He became an officer at NSA, the National Student Organization [Association], and directed a lot of support to SNCC.

So there was that kind of environment, intellectual and social environment, at Howard. And in addition to which, and this was important to me, being in the nation's capital, it was the site of embassies. And Jamaica became independent while I was at Howard and set up a Jamaican embassy. And Ghana had a Ghanaian embassy. So there were a lot of these African embassies opening, a lot of Caribbean embassies opening. So there was a local somewhere in the diplomatic ladder who might have in terms of world politics might have rated very low. But we had embassies. We had ambassadors. We could go visit them. And we did.

The population at Howard was very interesting. And I only realized after I got

there that my dentist back in Jamaica and my doctor back in Jamaica, all had been educated back and Howard. So Howard University had educated a lot of the medical professionals and architectural professionals and engineering professionals in the black world because it was a school that was affordable. The fees were very, very low at that time and it played a role across the black diaspora that was unique in American educational history. [00:30:00] So I think there were about 8,000 students at Howard when I was there. And I would say that 10 or 15 percent of them were from Africa. And another 15, maybe 20 percent of them were from the Caribbean. So that what you had there was a community of young black people, large numbers of the African Americans were from the South or from Chicago or New York, and a lot of young people—who was that Ghanaian politician who was assassinated early? He was next to Jomo Kenyatta in importance.

JB: Not Lumumba. He was Congo, wasn't he.

ET: Not Lumumba. He was Congo. This was a handsome young lawyer man. Tom Mboya. Alright. The Ghanaian political leader, Tom Mboya, handsome young lawyer man. His brother, who looked just like him, was at Howard with us. Bayard Rustin brought the president of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda, to talk to us. And Kaunda came in his book jacket and khaki stuff. I remember when Bayard introduced him, he said, "And it is said in Zambia that Kenneth Kaunda, the prime minister, met a lion in the forest, and the lion blinked." That was how he was introduced. So it was an extraordinary, heady ambiance and you would have had to be brain dead if you weren't inspired by the environment at Howard at that moment to take political action and we were. But we prefaced that by your saying NAG was one of the strongest groups, and I

didn't know what you meant by strong. But the fact is, we had any number of demonstrations. There was one I will tell you about, which has to do with the new men's gymnasium.

We used to go regularly to picket the White House, for example. And we secured some funds from the student government, we'd rent a bus, we'd bring it up over on campus and pick a busload of people down. Maybe have 60, 70, 100 people picketing the White House. We went to all the CORE demonstrations. So the mind should be very active. And on this particular demonstration, which concerned the new men's gymnasium, which Carmichael talks about in his book, we turned out maybe 1,000 students from Howard into the streets. We were active on the Route 40 demonstrations. We were active on everything that came down, because we always had a national focus and locus, we had reason to take to the streets, which we did. And we organized constantly. Like I said, it was a historical and revolutionary duty.

EC: One of the things that I was really interested in— Oh, sorry.

ET: You can just pick this up in the editing. So I was very amazed when I was working the Carmichael book, because I got to find out who the membership in NAG was. And it turns out that the membership in that organization in the four years I was there never exceeded 40 people. But, I mean, other people would come to meetings, who would plan programs who would do all the organizing and work. And yet those 40 people in the student population of some 8,000, managed to in not insignificant ways affect history. You had a question.

EC: In the book—

ET: Which book would that be?

EC: *Ready for Revolution.* In *Ready for Revolution*, Stokely talks about coming to a realization of the cultural constraints or some of the challenges that women faced joining NAG, just because of the gendered expectations of the day.

ET: I was wondering when you'd get to that.

EC: Well, one of the things I found interesting is that when I talk to people who were part of student groups on different campuses, one of the things that they immediately run up against is the curfew that women faced because it made it more challenging to even have planning meetings, say in Nashville, and so [00:35:00] I was wondering if you might talk about that a little.

ET: NAG was always in gender terms a very well integrated organization. And the young women in NAG were very, very faithful. Very committed. And very hard workers. They never really pushed for a leadership position during my years there. And we never thought to invite them into it. There was never any policy or attitude that said women couldn't be leaders. But there were some very articulate guys, and a lot of women said they were listening and learning. And whatever else operated in the society to teach women "their place," or that certain positions, certain aspirations weren't appropriate for women, they had obviously, to a certain extent, accepted. But that was only in the positions of formal and public leadership. I mean, I don't know any of the women who were shy about speaking up when we'd have our long discussions about deciding policy, who were shy about leading demonstrations, marching in demonstrations, who were shy about expressing themselves. It is almost African in the sense that there is an area of jurisdiction, or authority and control, which is feminine. And an area of control or authority in action, which is masculine. It was sort of like that.

It is only in retrospect that I recognize the extraordinary price that our sisters paid for being as devoted to the struggle as they were. It meant that they weren't into homecoming queen kind of activities. That they weren't into the accepted behavior of a Howard lady. That they weren't into the trivia of fashion and dressing up. Though they were attractive women and they took care of themselves, but they weren't the kind of trophy wives for the med school students and they weren't—some of them might have been members of the Greek letter organizations, but most of them I suspect weren't. So that they occupied a place outside the conventional social norms of the whole university student body. So did the men. But with men, I think, we can just say, "Kiss my black ass" and go on about our business. It wasn't so clear to me that a woman could do the same thing.

But, Mary Lovelace, who came from a good, bourgeois Mississippi family, whose father taught at Tougaloo, I believe, and had met Stokely when he came out from the Freedom Rides, she started to wear her hair natural and was damn near put out of the dorm. It was dean Patricia Harris, who was the most progressive administrator at the university at the time, who spoke up for her and interceded strongly on her behalf. Because those house mothers who thought that a young black woman who would wear her hair natural was "a disgrace to the race, would look like some disheveled Negro wench," didn't conform to the appearance patterns of a "Howard lady." And they behaved as if it was the end of the world, as if the natural order were changing. And Mary was not going to straighten her hair, and she wasn't going to leave the dorm. And finally it got to Patricia Harris, who was the Dean of Women, I believe, or Dean of Students, something like that, and she intervened very strongly.

So that was the other aspect of Howard University. When we were struggling to get NAG recognition, for example, Bill Mahoney, who was a member of SNCC, wrote an essay with the title, "Howard University: Neither Black Nor White, Merely Abject." And that was [00:40:00] one part of our attitude. I mean, going to struggle with the administration on various issues, I never really understood that that was a struggle the administration had to make for public consumption. But they never expelled any of us, as southern universities did. And they never formally stopped us from doing what we were doing, though the administration of Howard University itself couldn't formally endorse it. How did I get to that?

EC: I asked you about the women in NAG, and you went to—

ET: Right. So the price our sisters paid for being in the struggle was far more costly, was a far heavier burden than the men had to pay. What men heard was, "You're going to get yourself a criminal record. Which white folks are going to hire you? You're ruining your career. That's not why you're here. You're not paying attention to your schoolwork." I remember there was one contemporary of ours, who always wore suits. Always struck me as a very unctuous Negro. Always found him, whenever he went to visit a professor, he was flitting from one professor's office to another with documents in his hand. And clearly he was doing something that I don't think any of us in SNCC thought to do: he was building a resume. And he was said to be very smart, but I can't remember ever having a political conversation with this guy. So I didn't exactly hold him in contempt, but I didn't have any regard for him. Well, he went to Harvard Law School, of course, and if I say this I will probably identify him, but I think he was head of the New York Lawyers' Association and I believe is on the Board of Governors, was on the

Board of Governors [laughter] of Harvard University. So he went straight into the establishment. And, you know, all power to him. I suppose in the terms of the American meritocracy this is regarded as a very productive life and career.

But on the other hand, Bill Mahoney was dropping out of school to go work in the South. Charlie Cobb was dropping out of school. Hank Thomas I don't think graduated though he became a millionaire in the fast food industry. After he got, a big pacifist and CORE pacifist, Hank Thomas got drafted by the military and sent to Vietnam, and he went as a medic and came back. So, the price that the men paid were mostly in terms of upwardly mobile, careerist concerns. The price that the women paid was far more subtle and wide-ranging. It included that, but it also had to do with the concept of womanhood, and what a black woman should be and should not be, that they had to struggle against but we didn't.

EC: Muriel Tillinghast told me that when that was going on with Mary Lovelace, that Stokely asked her to wear her hair natural, too, as a support.

ET: Did she?

EC: She said she did. She said she had to figure out what it meant.

ET: Muriel was very active, and she was head of the NAACP. And she told me at one point there was possibly just some foreign trip for the officers of the NAACP and the male students—though she was president or vice president—the male students made up the delegation to go on this trip and left her out. And she went to Stokely and she said, "Here's what they're doing," and Stokely went and intervened in some forcible way, and she went on the trip. She told me that story.

EC: Oh, that's interesting. She told me that her first connection with NAG, that

she went on a demonstration without really thinking it through, or went to a meeting or something, and wasn't sure why. And before she left that meeting, Stokely had said, "We need you to do X, Y, or Z." She said, "I had no idea how or what, but he walked me through it and I did it. That was sort of how she described the interaction."

ET: Women really came through. I don't think any of us got to Howard with any extensive training in radical political activism. By that I mean, how do you write a press conference [release]? How you get the attention of the press? How do you conduct a nonviolent protest? [00:45:00] How do you deal with the police? How do you negotiate or maneuver around the administration? We didn't come with that experience. I mean, I told you that Hank Thomas and Cleve Sellers came from resistant, individual private ways in the southern context through which they came. But who developed political skills very fast, and I think that was what Muriel Tillinghast was telling you about herself.

And if you're talking about Howard, it would be incomplete and inaccurate not to talk about the influence and effect of Tom Kahn. Tom Kahn was white. Tom Kahn was a socialist. Tom Kahn was a radical political activist from New York, from the time he dropped out of high school at age 15. Tom Kahn was gay. Tom Kahn was a roommate and I assume lover of Bayard Rustin. So he was in those political circumstances and I got the distinct impression—I remember as a freshman seeing him, and I walked into the dining common and there's a guy in a very Italian-looking suit, he didn't look American at all to me, whose hair was down to his shoulders. This was 1959. I said to myself, "That's a very strange looking white boy." I mean, first of all there weren't very many white boys in there. Well, that was Tom. And we got into a conversation about literature. About Faulkner, I guess. And here I am coming out of Jamaica, so what do I know about

Faulkner? But he looked at me and said something like, "That's really very perceptive. That's really very perceptive of you." I said, "Well, thank you, sir."

As opposed to Bill Mahoney, for example. Bill Mahoney also had hair down to his shoulders. He looked like an Indian, and he would have been mistaken for a white guy. He was working at the desk, work-study, in the new men's residence hall, when I walked in. And he says to me, "Tell me, sir. Does the Kantian imperative also include dialectical materialism?" I said, "Are you serious?" Those are the first words that came out of his mouth. As freshmen. [Laughter]

But Tom Kahn. I was thinking about Tom. And I had the distinct impression after I got to know him and see how he operated that it was a political decision in the socialist left, that said, "Okay, Tom, you should go to Howard and try to guide the movement." Bayard Rustin was very active in nonviolence and in socialist politics and Tom was very active. And he had all the skills. He had more experience than we did, so that is what happened.

EC: You know, you talked about the price that women paid in terms of their sense of womanhood, and that seems to come up with men and relation to nonviolence and how that was perceived or how people grappled with that at times.

ET: Well, that used to raise its ugly head. I used to go work in a factory some summers, and I came back one fall, I was wearing this little straw cowboy hat pulled down this way. I was wearing my jeans, my cowboy boots with my sleeves rolled up, and maybe a vest, a denim vest. So it was a very macho image, though I never thought of it in those terms, that's how I saw myself. And I went to my first demonstration and Tom jumped on me, he says, "Where the hell you think you're going dressed like that? You

come down here with that kind of macho posturing, you're going to invite violence." I said, "You mean my dress has to be nonviolent? What the hell are you talking about?" [Laughter]

And it didn't help much that this young blonde lady, perhaps one of the whitest ladies I have ever met, her name was Cynthia Toombs, now deceased. She was very pale, very blonde. And I apparently she had some sort of interest in me. So whenever we were walking along these picket lines in Virginia or Maryland, she would end up walking next to me. And I kept saying, "Can't she go walk with someone else? I really don't want to be lynched." [00:50:00] But you couldn't come out and say that. And I remember she was walking next to me, and I'm thinking, "Goddamn it, Cynthia, go walk someplace else, please." But you didn't have too many white people in the demonstration anyway, so you had to be at least hospitable, right? And she started giggling. I said, "What are you giggling about?" She said, "Did you hear what those kids said?" I said, "No." She said, "They said me and you are going to get married and have polka dot kids." I said, "Married, is it?" It amused her. It didn't much amuse me. [Laughter]

EC: I guess not.

ET: Give me a minute. There was something else I was trying to remember having to do with that. You got to edit this so I don't look like a doddering idiot and it seems to have some coherence, you know? Else I am going to come looking for your ass.

JB: I'll give you Guha's address.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

JB: We're back.

ET: I'm thinking. What is it I was going to say again? Oh! You ready to go again?

So NAG always had some white students from surrounding institutions who would come here and demonstrate with us. [00:51:29] was such a person. And then of course there was Paul Dietrich, who you must have about. Very, very interesting guy. And there was a day that Malcolm X came to speak at Howard. Now this had been organized by Bayard, as I would later discover. We couldn't bring Malcolm X. We organized something called Project Awareness to get a certain kind of political discourse going on campus. But the university administration had to deal with those rednecks on the budget committee, and these southern congressmen, so they couldn't allow certain activities, and they couldn't endorse it. So we couched Project Awareness as freedom of inquiry, and as educational content, and I can show you some stuff about that in a minute. But when you are bringing certain controversial figures, you couldn't give them a platform, but what could you do? If you couldn't give them a platform, what could you do?

EC: Argue with them.

ET: Present them in a debate. So you had to have the opposite position represented. So for example we got Herbert Aptheker, who was the chief theoretician of the Community Party, USA. I've always wondered what the job description of a chief theoretician is.

EC: [Laughs] "I am paid to think."

ET: But anyway, he came, but when we brought him it had to be a debate. So we brought the chairman of the Socialist Party, USA, to discuss democracy and socialism and that kind of stuff. So when Malcolm came, it had to be in the form of a debate. We couldn't just give this "renegade, racist separatist" a platform, so he had to debate Bayard.

Though talking about it with people like Ed Brown, who recently died, and other people who were there, we'd never seen Bayard conduct a debate that way! He threw it. Threw the fight. He spoke briefly and perfunctorily about his position about integration and the working class, black people making alliances with the labor movement and integration of the society. He spoke about ten minutes, then shut up and said, "Because the minister has a more difficult position to argue, I will yield the rest of my time to him." Bayard never gives up to anybody! [Laughter]

So Malcolm just jumped in and said, "I come to you in the name of everything that is eternal: the black man." And the whole audience are young black students from the West Indies, from Africa. He said, "Before you were an American, you were black [coughs]. Before you were a Republican, you were black." And he launched into his nationalist argument.

But the story I meant to tell about that—much later, when I went to Nigeria to give a talk [00:55:00] at the 60th birthday celebration for Chinua Achebe, a little guy—I was someplace and I needed to get to someplace else—and this little guy says to me, "Come, professor, I'll give you a ride." And then it turned out he was a professor of Biology at Nsukka, a little Igbo man. He says, "You don't remember me, do you?" I said, "No, my brother, I really can't say." "I was at Howard with you. I marched with you and Stokely." I don't think he ever marched with us, but he said, "I remember when Malcolm came to debate Bayard Rustin." And so that's what I meant by the international character of the student body. And so all those things he remembered.

And the reason I said I don't think he marched with us is because foreign students really couldn't take part in the political affairs of the country. There was a stringent

regulation about their receiving that student visa that precluded them from doing so. So there were a lot of Caribbean people from Trinidad, British Guyana, from all over the other islands, and from Jamaica, who were there with me, who were equally affected by the winds of change. Their territories were becoming independent. They were inspired by the black movement in this country where black people were asserting themselves. And they would speak in support of it. They would even come to meetings on campus, but they would never go to demonstrations because they were terrified that if they did they would be deported.

Now how did I get to that?

EC: Oh, I think through Malcolm and through the story of that.

ET: Oh, right. And so the audience, Malcolm was speaking to us, was comprised of this generation of black people from all over the black world. And it was an extraordinary performance by Malcolm. Prior to that time, some of our white allies who had come to the demonstrations, were very excited that Malcolm X was coming, so they turned up on campus. You heard that story, right?

EC: Um-hmm.

ET: And myself and I know Courtland was with me. I was the editor of the student newspaper, I was supposed to interview Malcolm and then take him to the dinner and then to the lecture, to the debate. And for some reason we were supposed to meet in front of the girls' dorm, the street that runs through the whole university campus. The dorm we couldn't go into by the way; we would conduct our business on the pavement in front. So I am standing there with Courtland, waiting for Malcolm to come, and I went and look and there is Cynthia and two or three other white co-eds, running across, who

had always been on the demonstrations, running up, and I said, "Oh, Jesus." I was embarrassed. I was really embarrassed to see these white people. Because Malcolm was coming. And I was embarrassed to see them and wanted to avoid them, but I was embarrassed from that sentiment, by that feeling which I felt was somehow dishonorable.

So I kind of smiled as best I could. And they said, "Is Malcolm here yet!? Is Malcolm here yet!?" I said, "No, I'm waiting here for him, you know?" And somehow they were standing in front of the dorm and I was facing them, so my back was to the street. And Courtland was standing behind them. And he had said to me, as they came running up, "You don't want Malcolm to come and see you standing here talking to these devils." And if they had been white men it wouldn't have been so bad, but you know the whole notion about white women and the rest of that shit, the rest of that stuff. I said, "Well," I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "When Malcolm X comes, you're talking to these devils?" I said, look, "Detroit Red." I definitely called him by his street name because I wasn't going to call him minister or nothing. "Detroit Red can't come to this campus and tell me whom I should associate with or whom I should talk with. Who does Detroit Red think he is?" And I am declaiming now, on my high horse, so to say. And I am looking at Courtland's eyes, and Courtland is gradually getting paler, and paler, and he's saying "[murmuring]." And Courtland is normally a very dark fellow but he became a lighter shade of pale as he kept saying [whispers], "Look behind you." [Laughter]

And I turn around and there is Malcolm, [01:00:00] the sunlight glinting off his glasses, and just looking at her with a tight smile on his face. I said, [stammering] "Mr. X, Mr. X, welcome to Howard University, sir. [Laughter] I am the editor. I am supposed to interview you." And he said, [frowns], looking at me like that. Well, we had a very

good interview because I tossed up what in journalistic parlance we would call softballs. I mean, I said to him, "Is it true that your position is that the Negroes of this country are not really American citizens? Can that really be your position? After all, they are native to this country." He says, "My young brother, just because a cat has kittens in an oven, don't make them muffins." And I said, "Is it your position, sir, can it really be your position, that black people shouldn't fight in the armed forces of the United States?" And he says, "Well, if I see a bunch of bears have a bunch of wolves trapped in a cave, do you think I am going to fight with the wolves against the bears?" I said, "Alright."

And he would always—and this is a very African means of communication—talk in terms of parables and extended metaphors and fables, just like Aesop, whom you know was an African. Did you know that? You know Aesop's Fables, the animal stories. Well, they're nothing but African animal tales. He happened to end up a slave, in Greece, and these are African animal tales. Well, Malcolm had the same facility, of speaking in allegories, of never addressing the problem directly, but indirect speech, as they call it.

One time we were having a demonstration. We were marching to Robert Kennedy's office, and we are carrying a coffin. And the exact occasion of that I cannot remember. But somebody had been murdered, some civil rights person. That's why the coffin. And we are going down to place the coffin on Robert Kennedy's desk asking for federal intervention. And we had a pretty nice demonstration going. I remember I was marching in the front arm-in-arm with Courtland—no, Courtland wasn't there—Stokely, and Ed Brown, and Cleve, and Muriel, and the rest of the ladies. And we are walking down the road, and there is this tall, lanky fellow with his arms crossed, leaning against a light post, with a very cynical grin on his face. So I said, "Ain't that brother Malcolm?

That's Brother Malcolm!" So we left the demonstration, went running up to him. This was after I had interviewed him at Howard, so I knew him. And he recognized us all. We said, "Brother Malcolm, Brother Malcolm! How do you like our demonstration?" He said, "Well"—because the demonstration was integrated, a lot of liberals had come out for it—"if I see a line of rats and cats marching together into the same hole," he said, "if the cats ask me how we're doing, I say, 'You're doing fine.' But if the mice ask me how you're doing, I got a different answer to them," which was kind of deflating. And I said, "C'mon, what's your problem here, what's your problem? Is this because we have an integrated demonstration?" I said, "These good white folks marching with us are doing the right thing." He said, "Let me tell you something. Because you see a man throwing worms into the river, don't mean he a friend to fish." [Laughter]

EC: Can you remember what you thought of him then?

ET: I thought he was funny as could be. I actually was going to say, "As funny as a motherfucker." That can't go into, that can't go into—it can?

JB: You can say anything.

ET: Yeah, I know, "oral history." Hell.

We used to like him. We used to like his militance. We used to like his intelligence. [01:05:00] And I perceived that he was really trapped in the Nation of Islam. I mean, if you want to listen carefully to him, every time he had to [phone ringing] which he had to do very frequently—

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

JB: Ok, we're rolling again.

ET: Malcolm was an extraordinarily attractive, enigmatic, and complex figure to

us, but we liked his militance and we also liked his presence. I mean, Malcolm would dominate any room he walked into. And there was just a quality of seriousness, gravitas, and an element of danger to Malcolm that was very attractive to us, that masculine thing you were talking about. Any room that he walked into, he would dominate, which was quite the opposite of King. If Dr. King was in the room, you would ignore him. He had no physical presence to speak of, until he opened his mouth. And then once that was open he would dominate it, but Malcolm with his just his sheer presence would. So we liked that about him. But we also perceived that he really had an activist spirit. He really wanted to be involved in the struggle for black people, which he wasn't permitted to do by the ideology and the theology of the Nation of Islam. And it became very clear to us that he was feeling that constraint. That is why we saw him standing by the side of the road looking at our demonstration and he had those funny, dismissive things to say, but as we walked away from him I had a sense that he looked very wistful standing there, as we were marching off to go confront Bobby Kennedy.

Kennedy came out and spoke to us on the pavement in front of the Justice Department, as I recall. But prior to that Tom Kahn and Courtland had gone to sit in in his office; we had two people sitting in. [Laughter] And by the time we got to Bobby Kennedy's office, two officers came out the front door pushing wheelchairs, and sitting in those wheelchairs was Tom and Courtland, just wheeling about. If we were in the South, they would probably dragged them out and beat them, but Bobby Kennedy had them wheeled in wheelchairs out of the office.

EC: I wonder if that was when Louis Allen was killed.

ET: That was probably the reason. We took any event as a reason for the

demonstration. We noticed that when Malcolm had to recapitulate the ideology, and theology, and strange racial anthropology of the Nation of Islam he would always distance himself from it. It didn't look like he was distancing himself; it looked like he was paying tribute to the leader. He said, "As the Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us, as the Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us." He would preface every one of those remarks that way. And after a while, you hear it, you begin to say, "As the Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us, but I ain't so sure it makes no sense." [Laughter] But that was the unsaid portion, you know? So Malcolm was an interesting guy.

EC: Did you have any contact with him personally after he left the Nation?

ET: Yeah. When I was at the Friends World College, I invited him to come there. Harold Taylor had this Friends World College business out on Long Island, which was a strange experience. I invited him to come speak, but that was when he was having his problems and he couldn't come, but he wrote me a very nice letter, which unfortunately I have lost.

There was one politically incorrect incident. But to hell with it. Put it on the record. One of the reasons Malcolm was around Howard so much, around Washington so much, he was organizing the Washington mosque, which hadn't existed in the Nation of Islam, so it gave him a reason to be there a lot. For example, that Project Awareness thing which I told you, we had to stage debates because we couldn't just bring people. We had one very important event on the responsibility of the black writer. And that influenced me personally a great deal [01:10:00] because John Killens, whose son was at Howard, he came to speak. We invited Ralph Ellison, who found it impossible to be present. Not surprising. But Jimmy Baldwin came, and *Purlie Victorious*, Ossie Davis came. And,

again, it was really Tom Kahn who understood these kinds of things. He said, "Well, you have to"—I think Sterling Brown also spoke, and well as it's student activities, Project Awareness—"you should be the moderator." So I was up there on the platform with all these important people. I had never asked for that. It was Tom who was saying, you know, because he was thinking of the politics, you've got to have a student presence there and this kind of stuff. And as we were walking out of the room, there were two figures who showed up. And there was this guy with his hat kind of pulled down and he was trying to be anonymous, and dark glasses. And it was Courtland who said to me, "Hey! Ain't that Brother Malcolm?"

And it was indeed Malcolm X. I ran up to him, I said, "Hey, Brother Malcolm, what are you doing here?" And he said, "I don't want to be recognized." And I said, "What are you doing here?" He said, "Whenever Jimmy Baldwin was talking, whenever that little brother talks, I always come and listen." And he was the one who told Jimmy one time, "If I am the warrior of this movement, you are the poet." So he had a lot of respect for Jimmy and Jimmy had a lot of respect for him.

The other person who had come just to listen was Sidney Poitier. So, Malcolm was around the university, around Washington a lot. That's how come he was on the street by the demonstration and stuff like that. And had complained to Bayard in point of fact, that while he had been invited to Oxford, and he had been invited to Harvard, he had never been invited to Howard. So that's why that debate was set up for him. He was around organizing.

So one day, he was there in the community, around 14th St., I guess, or U Street. What's that street, 14th and U. And he was talking to brothers off the street, so a group of

us stopped by to hear. And he was talking in some kind of a room. It wasn't a hall or something. And I'm not sure if it was a bar, or whatever it was, but it was some kind of public space, kind of thing. Or maybe it was on the street corner. Trying to remember the geography of it.

But there was an old player, black hustler, obviously down on his luck. His stingy brim hat and various threadbare hustler's suit, and obviously, clearly quite drunk. Older guy. Much older. And he was listening and listening, nodding off and listening. So as Malcolm is leaving, surrounded by some of his Nation of Islam, I mean, Fruit of Islam, or some of his supporters, the old hustler said, "Young fella, young fella. A lot of what you said, I agree with. A lot of what you said, I agree with. But some just don't hit me right. Well, first of all, I ain't giving up my pork chops." [Laughter] Everybody starts to laugh. Well, everybody was laughing but not sure how to do it in the presence of the stern Malcolm, you know, laughing behind their arms, stuff like that, behind their hands. "And one more thing." And Malcolm is really very tolerant. And he says, "What's that, my brother?" And he said, "Everything you said about the white man is true. The white man, he a devil. But the white woman? Pure angel." I said, "Oh, shit." [Laughter] So you obviously know what profession that brother was following. As they say in the street, "Pimpin' ain't easy." "White man, he a devil! But the white lady, she an angel." And I think Malcolm cracked a smile. [Laughter]

JB: I'm going to close the file.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

JB: Ok, we're back.

ET: And SNCC about nonviolence. It was Charlie and Mendy Samstein who

started that. You know that discussion?

EC: I don't.

ET: Professor, why don't you just pose—

EC: [01:15:00] Can you tell me about nonviolence and manhood?

ET: Well, you know, at Howard, we really did see nonviolence as a strategy, which was counterintuitive and opposed to our total personalities and sensibilities. First of all, most of the men, at least the ones I was close to, were athletes of one kind or another. I was a track man. I even went out for football. I didn't last long, but I did. One of the only West Indians to go out for football. I lasted about two weeks. And I used to box with Ed Brown a lot. So we were physical. And in my own culture, just like African American young men, the notion that certain matters of honor, what you had to do was fight. So nonviolence was not in any way natural to us, or normal to us.

And one of the biggest sticking points was if somebody came and attacked a sister. And it was something I worried about a lot. And it would come up in discussion, I would say with Tom, for example, who was a committed pacifist—I don't know if you know his career. He went on to work for the labor union. Became very powerful in the AFL-CIO, and had a real role in Solidarity, the Polish labor union that broke Communism. Tom was shuffling funds back and forth, going to Poland all the time and carrying money for Solidarity, you know? So he was a committed labor nexus kind of guy. But he was also a pacifist. And he was gay.

And I'd say, "You know, what are we going to do if some of these crackers attack the sisters? I mean, I don't know if I'm going to be nonviolent." He says, "Well, if you declare yourself a conscientious objector, one of the classical questions, the traditional

questions when they interrogate you is, "What if your younger sister was attacked by a racist? Would you stand by and be nonviolent?" And he says, "The answer you would give"—which seemed to amuse him greatly—"was, 'No, sir, I would nonviolently interpose my body between her and the attacker.'" And, he said, "That's what you do if a sister gets attacked. You throw yourself over her, don't attack the other person. You come between them and just stand there and take the blows. And so that's what I resolved I would do in that circumstance. It never, ever happened to me.

Well, the real problem I had with nonviolence was on those Washington demonstrations. And one has to be clear, now. The conditions which prevailed in the South weren't conducive to nonviolent practice. Nonviolent practice is theater. Nonviolent practice is psychological warfare. Bayard was an extraordinary practitioner of that because he was so dramatic. And what you do is you control the discourse. You control the behavior of your so-called attacker, even though you never attack him. Bayard has an essay called "Nonviolence vs. Jim Crow," which shows you how that operates—the questions you ask, the things you say, the behavior you do. Even though you might be being beaten, there is no question who is controlling the encounter. But that requires a small, enclosed place. It requires witnesses. If the media is there with their cameras, so much the better. But on a dark country road, or if you're sleeping in your house, there's no technique of nonviolence that can protect you against a sniper or somebody coming to bomb the house. So you need to understand where nonviolence operates and where it doesn't.

Now in the D.C. operations, that was an arena for nonviolence. And the media was there in front of the White House, in front of the Capitol, in front of Howard

University. So you behave in a certain way, and you let the mob and the rest of them behave in their own way, and you psychologically and politically win, just by controlling the image. At our demonstrations, there was one group who would invariably show up: the American Nazi Party. With Lincoln Rockwell in the storm trooper's uniform walking around the place, smoking cigarettes in the cigarette holder. And his followers, the members of the master race, [01:20:00] wearing swastikas and khaki and stuff like that. But it used to [coughs] really annoy me, because what the cops would do is, we would have our picket line. And that would force them to have their own picket line. And they'd be walking around the place with their racist signs and their swastikas, which was particularly troubling if it was a CORE demonstration. And many of them were, because most of the CORE membership were professional people, intellectual people, white people. They're a northern, essentially intellectual, pacifist group. And a great many of their members were Jewish.

And the other thing that bothered the hell out of me was that these representatives of the master race didn't seem to be in good physical condition. Some of them were fat, some of them were pot-bellied. Some of them looked like they were certifiable imbeciles. Looks fairly retarded. Unshaven, walking around the place talking about the master race. While we were relatively fit, clean-cut student types. But there's a certain point at which the two lines would come fairly close. There would be a cop standing, you'd walk around the cop. So there would be a cop standing there, you know, five or six yards. So when you got there and you were turning, a member of the master race in his swastikas and stuff was looking at you, and, "Nigger this, and nigger the next." And you're saying, "Cracker, I am going to kick your ass," under your breath as you turn around. And I kept

really wanting—I said, you know, if these suckers would just—the demonstrations would end at the same time. I said, if they'd just hang around the place so we could meet them on the way back to campus, walking back to campus, then we could really see who was the master race. Which was a fairly naive form of machismo on my part. You can't have a regular fair fight like we used to have. Not even a gang fight. These guys obviously had clubs, probably guns and knives and stuff. It would have been a nasty fight; it would have been ugly.

Our position was, my position was, as long as we're not in a formal demonstration, where we had a necessity for the discipline and the nonviolence, if I catch you crackers on your way back to school, we will really see who is the master. But fortunately it never happened. I believe they got in their cars and went back to Maryland or Virginia or wherever their headquarters were as soon as the demonstrations were over.

But on the other hand, in Mississippi, where nonviolence was not—there were not that many demonstrations, and in the day-to-day business of organizing, the question of nonviolence never became that much of an issue. Except when Charlie and Mendy Samstein said that they were in the house of one of the local leaders. Don't know if it was— Or whose house it was in. Or Mr. Miles? And they said the Klan was riding. And after supper, whoever's house it was, the farmers whose house it was had a couple of sons. And after supper, he took down his shotguns and his rifles and he gave one to each of his sons and he took one, and said they were getting ready in case the Klan attacked, and to defend the house. And then they asked Charlie and Mendy, "Y'all want a gun?"

And that was the conundrum they brought to the meeting. They said, "Well, why should we have a gun? We are supposed to be nonviolent." "Well, if the people whose

guests we are are defending their homes and they offer us a gun, do we take it or not?"

EC: Yeah.

ET: And that was one of the first discussions after I went to a SNCC meeting in the South. And that discussion must have lasted three, four hours. As I say, we in NAG were nonviolent only strategically. People from Nashville, for example, John Lewis and the brother from Mississippi, what's his name? And Diane Nash and people like that were nonviolent. Like CORE was nonviolent—

EC: Oh yeah. Um-hmm.

ET: As a religious, spiritual conviction. So that was a tension.

EC: Bob Moses said something to me recently about Jane Stembridge and Stokely and a gun at the Freedom House in Greenwood.

ET: Um-hmm.

EC: Do you know anything about that?

ET: I've heard it indirectly. I think Stokely was sent to get the guns out. Somebody had some guns in there and Bob sent Stokely had to go and recover them and get them out of the Freedom House, [01:25:00] so they couldn't be found.

But to cut back to the discussion in SNCC. So some of the people like Nash [said] "We are nonviolent, we are nonviolent. Absolutely we cannot carry guns. It's totally antithetical to us." Forgetting that when Bayard went down to Martin Luther King's house in Montgomery, he almost sat down on a gun, sitting on a chair. And that they, especially the leadership, the activist group of the black community, and not just them, had a tradition of having to defend themselves since neither the law nor the state was going to protect them, so they had to protect each other. Like [1:25:48], "I cock my gun

and I commence to popping! I commence to popping!" [Laughter]

So there was a long discussion in the meeting, and finally people concluded. They said, look, "The organization is nonviolent. But individuals aren't necessarily nonviolent all the time. If you are in somebody's home and the home is in danger of being attacked, and they decide to defend their home, and you, and they offer you a weapon to do so, whether you take it or not is not SNCC's business. That is a personal decision you have to make and if you feel comfortable sitting there and allowing other people to do your fighting for you, then you do that, if that's what your nonviolence means. But SNCC has no position on what you do in that circumstance." And that struck me as an eminently intelligent and smart way to resolve the discussion, so that impressed me a great deal about SNCC.

You asked me about the first time I went South. It was to Mississippi and it was to a SNCC meeting in Waveland. That was an interesting story.

EC: Ooh. That was your first time South?

ET: Yes, ma'am. No, it was my second time south. The first time south, I drove. Well, I'll tell that story, too. We were driving down. NAG car. Carmichael was doing the driving, as he always insisted on doing. Courtland was there. Cleve Sellers was there because we drove through South Carolina and stopped at Cleve's house and his mother and father fixed a great feast for us. I remember Cleve was in the car. I don't know if Len Holt was. Bill Mahoney was. We had several SNCC officers. Mendy who set it up. Remind me to tell you about that SNCC conference. And we are going on our way, we must have been in South Carolina, North Carolina. I forget where the hell we were. And it was the dead of night. And people were hungry. But they were driving past these

roadside restaurants, like Howard Johnson and that stuff. I said, "I ain't going to take out no stuff in the car." I said, and I was still my arrogant self, I said, "If you're going to be free, you have to act free!"

EC: [Laughs]

ET: How are you driving past these damn restaurants. Let's go in there and order some food." And they said, "Shut up, Thelwell. You don't know what you're talking about." This was my first time going south. These guys had been before. And since talk is cheap—I was reading a book or something like that. And every time I would look up I would say, "Hell, you're driving past another restaurant. Let's stop and get something. You're going to starve yourself to death. If you're free, act free." All of a sudden, Carmichael jumped on the brakes, came screeching in the street [makes brake sound], drove into a parking lot. Said, "Alright, nigger. Act free." In the dead of night.

So I look around. Nobody will look at me. Ed Brown is starting out the window. Nobody will look at me. Alright. I'm going to act free. So I jump out of the car and walk up to the restaurant. As I approach the lights, the light seemed to get brighter and brighter and when I walked in there, these were Southerners. I'd never seen Southerners before. They were all sunburnt. They were working-class looking people, they had on khakis or jeans, and big hats and cowboy boots. And they might not even have looked at me, but there were some people who did. [01:30:00] And I had the feeling that all the conversation in this brightly lit restaurant had come to a stop, and that people were looking at me, and I was absolutely terrified. And I said, "Well, I could walk out and say they wouldn't serve me," but I said, "I ain't going to do that." So I sat down, at a booth, not at the—at a booth, with the window like—and nobody came to serve me. And I think

people are looking at me, and I am getting more, and more, and more terrified. And I am saying, "Well I can't walk out. I've got to make a stand of some kind. Am I going to demand service? What the hell am I going to do? Thelwell, how you get yourself into this goddamn situation? Why don't you just walk out of the place?" I am sitting there terrified, when I happened to look at the window. There is Carmichael, grinning at me. And Ed Brown is next to him, and Courtland. They're all standing there by the window to see what is going to happen to me. I don't know if they were going to rush in to save me if shit happened.

EC: [Laughing] They were going to rush back to the car.

ET: But they said, come on, come on. I was very happy to get up and walk out of the place and go drive. I was so glad to see those guys standing there looking. They hadn't totally abandoned me. The mess that my big mouth had put me in. And so we get to the car and there is a long silence, and I don't really want to say, "Gee, I was so glad to see you guys. I am so glad you were there." But they were all quiet, but smiling, you know. They said, "Are you tired of acting free now, Thelwell?" I said, "Yeah." I shut up. But I was grateful to see you, you know?

EC: Terrified of the South, and yet—

ET: Yes, ma'am. But I remember, back to Atlanta. And when I got up that morning, I walked toward the black community, and there were these little houses with these little raised gardens, and what was amazing about it, the land was black and they had shells around the flowers and stuff, and some of the flowers were the exact same flowers I had seen around my grandmother's house in the hills of Westmoreland. And I had an immense rush of nostalgia, because—and the way the beds were organized, very

much like my grandmother's beds. Something I hadn't thought about for 25, 30 years. It just came rushing back at me. The next time I went to—my sister, I always meant to write and never did— The next time I went south to a SNCC meeting—I didn't have to drive. [James] Forman called up and said, "Thelwell, I need you down here earlier." I said, "Well, I am driving down with our brothers on Thursday, the meeting's Friday." He said, "No, no, no, no. You come on Wednesday. I am going to send you a plane ticket." I said, "Wow." I had just got onto the SNCC staff. Jim was pretty much the chief executive. So I said, "Whoa!" I felt really important. The CEO wanted to fly me down there, he needs me. What the hell is going on? So I didn't drive down. I got on a plane and flew down to Atlanta. [Phone rings]

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

[Conversation about the phone call]

JB: You were just landing in Atlanta.

ET: Yeah, and Forman meets me, or sends somebody to meet me and drive me to the SNCC office. Takes me into the office, there's a typewriter and there's a tape recorder. I am very flattered that Forman has wanted me down early. He said, "Look. There you have a taped history of SNCC. I need a speech for the meeting on Friday. Can you do that?" Obviously, someone had told him I was a writer. Very flattered. I said, "I would be happy to do so, Jim." And it was an amazing tape, and it talked about when SNCC first was formed, and he came in as executive secretary. How he didn't have any money, how certain barbecue joints would feed the young women, how [01:35:00] certain hairdressers would do their hair for them, how the community supported them. How, he remembered from one of the early projects they called him and said they

needed, a duplicating machine. And he said, there was no money to get it. And he said, "I stood up in the office and tears came to my eyes. In this big, rich country these young people need just a [01:35:21] machine and I can't get it for them. I resolve to get it for them." And the narrative was the narrative of his building up the base of support. By this time SNCC was really affluent, right? I mean, not the way other organizations were, but from that humble start. We had only one telephone in the house and that's because what's-her-name was paying for it from our YMCA grant.

EC: Ms. Baker.

ET: Not Ms. Baker.

EC: Connie?

ET: Connie Curry. Connie Curry was paying for it. When he first came to the office there was just one telephone, and one box with papers in there. And that telephone was only there because Connie Curry was paying for it out of her YMCA fellowship and the office was only there because SCLC gave them this one room. And now we had this office on Raymond Street and we were a national organization. And so the text, the narrative that he had put on tape was incidents from his building that, and his thoughts and stuff like that, and he wanted that for his speech.

The question was, why did he want it for a speech? Because the guy who was married to the sister Jean Wheeler—

EC: Frank Smith.

ET: Frank Smith was running against him. Frank Smith had raised an insurrection to depose the leadership in the Atlanta office. And Jim was about to fight back and he wanted the speech as his kind of campaign signature. [Laughter] So, I made quite a

lovely speech. It was very moving material, you know? Especially for that audience. The growth of the organization, and the heroism of the early people in it. So I fashioned it into quite an effective speech. And at the end, Jim had said, "One of the things we need to do, one of the things we owe to the movement is to take care of our health. I haven't taken as good care of my health as I should have, so now I have to go to a hospital for a couple weeks of recuperation, but I will be back." And he says, "I will be back in a couple weeks, but I know the organization will continue and flourish, continue to be a band of brothers and a circle of trust. May the circle be unbroken." That's how I ended the speech.

The night before that meeting, I go into, the staff is coming in from all their various projects, and I really used to like, and still do, black southern culture, the oral tradition and the music. And people know that. They used to call me Old-funny-talking Mike Thelwell, "Here come Old-funny-talking Mike Thelwell," disparaging my Jamaican accent. So, people used to play cards, pinochle or whatever it was they played, at various tables. So I'd go to all the tables of the southern staff, like I would see my good sister from Alabama who used to carry a gun.

EC: Annie Pearl?

ET: Annie Pearl. Annie Pearl Avery, and the Peacock brothers at one table. I'd go up and say, "You know how much I love the culture and the way you guys sing?" "Yeah man, yeah, yeah." I said, "There's a song that I just have a feeling that I want to hear. 'May the Circle Be Unbroken.'" They say, "You like that song, Mike?" I said, "Yeah, man, can you sing it for me please?" And they'd start to raise the song, and I'd sing along, I'd say thank you. Then sitting at another table there'd be Jessie Morris and a

bunch of other people and I'd go over there and say, "You know, there was one of the songs that my brothers and sisters sing that I really love extraordinarily well: 'May the Circle Be Unbroken.' You think you can sing that for me?" And I knew how Forman's speech ended, and I was kind of priming the audience for the speech, right? So I got about five or six tables to indulge my sentimental love of this song. I got them singing the night before [sings], "May the circle, be unbroken." So I was kind priming. The only political meeting I've ever really— [01:40:00]

So in the morning, Jim gets up, and he launches into the speech, which I had structured for him. And it was very moving and he talked about how they had nothing when they started and how they built the organization, and the alliances and contacts he had made.

Oh, I forgot to tell you, because I had gone to Atlanta and worked, I didn't drive straight down to Waveland. Or, let me see, no, we fly down. So we got on a plane. Did we fly down to Waveland? I forget whether we flew. Maybe I drove down with Jim? However we got to Waveland, when we are driving into the parking lot, there was a Sojourner Fleet. Do you know how we got those?

EC: Was it a donation from the UAW?

ET: It was a donation, but it wasn't—the United Auto Workers organized the auto industry. So that one of the things they negotiated with them was the ability to buy cars for cost price. Now, those cars were selling for $2,000, $2,500, $3,000, but they cost $500 to make. And that's the price the UAW would pay to the autoworkers for them. So the UAW bought cars for us, at $500 a pop. So we had these new Impalas. They were really great cars. The southern staff, the organizing staff really loved them. And as we

drove into the parking lot—now remember the text and substance of Jim's speech was the poverty from which we had come. Now, he said, "Sojourner Motor Fleet, Sojourner Motor Fleet, Sojourner Motor Fleet," pointing to all these cars and puffing up his chest.

So, anyway, first day of the meeting, Jim gets up and he delivers this speech. And it's a very moving speech. And he gets to the conclusion and talks about we have to protect our health, he's going to the hospital but he promises he will be back. Like [General Douglas] MacArthur, he will return. And he says, "And SNCC will go on, a band of brothers, and a circle of trust. May the circle be unbroken." And he turns away from the microphone like Dr. King used to do, and from all over the hall, I hear, [singing] "May the circle, be unbroken, by and by, Lord, by and by." And it was so frigging moving that I started to cry. And I said to myself, "Thelwell, you can't stand in the room and be crying in a situation that you yourself have organized and set up. You can't be crying at the meeting that you rigged. So I ran out. I ran out of the room, right? [Laughter] To go stand up underneath a tree. And then somebody else ran out of the meeting and they were crying, too. And it was Frank Smith, the insurgent. And Frank Smith said, "Mike Thelwell, you done castrated me." And I said, "Negro, you crying just like me!"

EC: [Laughs]

ET: That's a story I've always meant to write. [Pause] It was a splendid irony: the same insurgent we were organizing against, he was so touched by the speech that he was outside of the room crying, too. I reminded Frank of that and he never denied it.

EC: What was Frank organizing, the insurgency?

ET: He wanted to become chair as opposed to Jim. He wanted to replace Jim from

the chairmanship. And I don't remember what issues he had, but he was traveling around to all the various projects, and talking, that kind of stuff, enough to get Jim alert and a little bit anxious.

EC: You know, I've seen versions of that speech in the papers. Would you like a copy of a version of it?

ET: Sure. Is it as moving as I recall it?

EC: I don't know if I've actually seen the speech or if I've seen portions of the larger story. The history of SNCC. But it describes those early days and what it looked like. I'll send it to you and you tell me. I think I've seen a couple versions, so one of them might be the actual speech that you constructed out of it.

ET: If there is a good narrative description of that meeting, I would like to see it. But that's how I remember it, anyway.

EC: When I was reading these, I was guessing it was from Waveland or before Waveland, [01:45:00] but I didn't know. And so I've never heard the story.

ET: The full context.

EC: Yeah, the context. So Frank, he forgive you?

ET: Yeah. I mean, he didn't say it in an angry way. He was crying, shit. We were both very moved. A lot of people in that meeting were crying, actually.

EC: That was an emotional meeting.

ET: Um-hmm. But after Jim's speech, I mean at the end of that speech with that spontaneous "Raise the Sun," "May the Circle Be Unbroken," I said, "Yeah!"

EC: You primed it.

ET: And I ran out of the meeting.

EC: Judy says that there is another point in that meeting where it felt like things were just coming apart, and Jean had been teaching her a song, and asked her, he was like, "Come on, Judy. Now we need to sing."

ET: That was a different meeting.

EC: It was a different meeting?

ET: That was a meeting of the Summer Project. The Summer Project, when they broke into song and saved the meeting.

EC: I think, well, I know what you're talking about.

ET: At least that was one. Maybe there is another one.

EC: I think she said it was another one. It was a different song. Because the one at Oxford, that was "Freedom They Say Is a Constant Sorrow."

ET: "They Say Freedom Is a Constant Sorrow," yeah, which is a very haunting song.

EC: Since we're talking about Waveland, I should probably ask you about the notorious Waveland—your brother Stokely's comment.

ET: That's thoroughly discussed in that book.

EC: I know it is, but unfortunately not everybody will read the book. Maybe you can do it for a different audience?

ET: I will, I will, I will. [Pause] How much time do we actually got on tape?

JB: Well, maybe we can go ten more minutes on this drive, and then I'll put another drive in—

ET: Yeah, but how much tape do we have, time-wise?

JB: We have another two and a half hours.

ET: No, no, how much we got, in the box, in the can?

JB: Maybe two hours, a little less?

ET: Alright, because there are long pauses and repetitions. If you edit it properly, that's probably not more than an hour, right?

JB: Yeah, not more than an hour.

ET: Okay, so you want to go where now?

EC: If you would do the Stokely in Waveland, for this audience, because even though it's out in the book, it's still distorted.

ET: No, no, you're right. Now, write down for me so I don't forget: "SNCC, Washington conference."

EC: Yeah, okay. And then we also talked about the FBI and how you got to UMass, too.

ET: That too.

EC: I am sure there's more.

ET: There are two really important political events coming out of the Washington office, which wasn't even included, whoever put the fucking program together for the SNCC 50th Anniversary. Somebody should have asked me to write up the Washington office material, you know? One of them is the Challenge vote on the day Congress opened in January 1965? '64? It was January '65.

EC: Yeah.

ET: Because the election was '64, right?

EC: Because the Summer was '64, and the election, and then it was when Congress—so yes, it was January '65.

ET: January '65, okay. You know what that vote was? Of course you know. 149 voted for us, 149 members of the House voted to keep the Mississippians from sitting.

EC: Which is extraordinary.

ET: Of course it's extraordinary. I organized it. I know how extraordinary it was. That's what I want to tell you about.

EC: So, why don't we switch the drive?

ET: I got to go pee again, but—

JB: Okay, it's a good time.

ET: And I want to have some coffee.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

ET: There is that. And the other thing, it wasn't even SNCC by this time. It was the MFDP [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party] Office. [01:50:00] We changed the content of the Voting Rights Act. Did you know that?

EC: I didn't.

ET: Most people don't. And that's a story that needs telling fully.

EC: It sure does.

ET: The problem with the story, since I was the organizer during that, it looks like taking credit, you know? It looks self-serving.

EC: We still need to know, though. But we still need the history.

ET: I think when people are telling something that's self-serving, it seems inflated. When you hear this you'll see that it's not inflated.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

JB: Back up again.

ET: No, leave it, because we'll put it in with those other three, which have to do with stuff that might have been deleted from the book. But I'll tell the story anyway.

So this—and we'll see whether you can pick up on it, we'll see whether you can pick up on it, okay, this is a cultural matter, a black thing you wouldn't understand. So this speaker is speaking. And he is talking about how a black man's future lies in Africa, and Africa is a rich continent, and you know, that argument about how we should develop it and also go home to Africa. And this hustler, just like the one who attacked Malcolm and said that the white ladies were angels, this hustler comes up, and he's half drunk. He's come out of a bar. And he says, "Shee-it, they ain't can't even make matches in Africa. I ain't left nothing in Africa." So the people turn, "Shut up, shut up, shut up." The people are getting agitated. And the nationalist keeps talking, and the hustler, he comes over, he keeps talking: "Shee-it, I ain't going to change my Cadillac for no camel." And he goes on and on, "Shee-it, I ain't left nothing in Africa." So the people begin to get more and more agitated and they're about to shut this guy up forcibly, attack him.

And the speaker sees that. And every time, I've seen this too, every time there'd be a talk there'd be about two cops, standing there with their night sticks in their hand, to maintain order. So if the people attack this hustler, this drunken hustler, then the cops are going to come in swinging their clubs and the whole shebang. So the speaker has to obviate this. And just at that time—oh, I forget to tell you. This hustler, he's got his coat over his shoulder, but his hair is conked, you know, processed. That's an important part of the story I forgot, see? If I tell it again, I'll tell it right. And just as the hustler is getting more and more obstreperous and disrupting the meeting, a little drizzle starts to fall. And the speaker looks and says, "Huh. It's raining. My brother, you better go back inside

because your hair is going to go back to Africa before your mind do."

[Laughter]

JB: You got to be fast on your feet—

ET: You got it, right? You got the story. She wanted to cut it. I said, "What?" She didn't understand it. It was meaningless to her. She was a white American. What the fuck would it mean to her? I said, "No, no. Let me explain to you." I explained it to her. She said, "Oh, my God." So we left that. And the others she wanted to cut, we left, too. And I'll tell you some of those stories.

EC: So, let's start with—you said that the SNCC conference at Howard was your first assignment?

ET: You're right. And my first political lesson. You see, when Forman decided to set up a SNCC office and the NAG people suggested that I should have the job, I didn't have anything to do and I had just graduated, so it was great. They wanted a Washington representative. The impolite term for it is lobbyist. And someone who could maintain the interests of SNCC before the national media in Washington, and in the halls of Congress, and to the White House if you could get there. Said they wanted a presence in Washington, which is—oh Jesus, I moved.

JB: That's okay.

ET: Which is what every national organization wants. And Bill Mahoney was sent up, from the South, to come work with me. We were both co-directors of the office. And I remember going [01:55:00]—I knew Bill, remember, he asked me about the Kantian imperative and Marxian dialectic when I first met him. So I knew he was a strange fellow but I didn't know how strange until I went to meet him at the bus station and he comes

off then bus and he has a box, a wooden box, and a little cardboard box. In the wooden box he had any number of philosophical textbooks. And in the cardboard box he has drawers, a pair of dungarees, and one shirt. That was his complete wardrobe, apart from what he was wearing.

So we come in, we set up the office, right? And the first assignment was, we want to have a conference in Washington so the staff can learn what federal programs there are and what can be done, and how to access them and how they can use them in the interest of the communities. So, get all the people from the Department of Agriculture, you want the Justice Department, you want people from the Department of Housing. A whole range of federal bureaucrats we were supposed to get to come to these meetings, which we succeeded in doing. And the SNCC field staff, and the local people would come up, and we'd have these conferences. And it was at Howard. I don't know what documentation you found on that. And this was my first chance to meet all the SNCC—and the northern staff was coming, too. People from New Jersey, from Massachusetts, from New York. So it was my first chance to be around all these SNCC people, many of whom I had been reading about, who were extraordinary, bright, and attractive young people. It was really a great congregation to be in.

But after the first day, like all conferences the first day the room is full, everybody is present, and the when the federal bureaucrats started to come in and talk about these programs, the meetings got smaller and smaller and smaller. I was very distressed that the conference wasn't being successful. And at a certain point it got very late, and people were tired. And Bob got up and said, "Alright, it looks like people are tired and they are losing attention. We need some energy. Mrs. Hamer, come and talk to the people." That's

the first time I saw Fannie Lou Hamer, and she got up and talked about how she went to register, and they stopped the bus. They put her off the plantation, shot into her house. A very powerful story, and Mrs. Hamer was a powerful speaker. And then she started to sing, and the whole room started to sing, and it was my first real introduction to the southern spirit of the movement. Because Mrs. Hamer was the exemplification of southern black culture, and the best of it, you know? It was the first time I heard Mrs. Hamer and it was a very, very powerful occasion for me, which I have never forgotten.

And that's when I met most of the SNCC staff. Ultimately the conference was judged to have been very successful, and people got the information they needed. And I got my first political lesson from Jim, because to do this conference we have to get resources. So I am going around the place to all the labor unions, all the liberal political organizations, which really was my job. I mean most people who send lobbyists to Washington send them with big bankrolls, so they are giving out stuff to people. I was going around the place asking people for stuff. So I really recognized Black Power in those terms when it came. We no longer have to be supplicants. We've got to take something to the meetings. We've got to have something to trade. We've got to go into meetings with something, not just our hat in our hands. Because, like the meeting I told you about with the Catholic archbishop who told me he had just been inaugurated and the ceremony was expensive and his ring cost him so much. And it really was like the movement was going to white organizations seeking support, almost as a charitable dispensation.

And I wasn't having all that great success going to the usual suspects, as it were. And then I went to an unusual suspect, who was *persona non grata* and an outsider

organization: the Teamsters. And the Teamsters gave me $1,000, which was a lot of money. [02:00:00] To me, anyway. It was the first contribution I'd really gotten. So I said to Forman, I said, "Jim, the Teamsters have said they will give us $1,000. But can I put their name in the program as one of the sponsors?" Because, you know, you're not supposed to deal with them. He says, "Mike, you can't sleep with them at night and refuse to walk down the street with them in the morning." So the Teamsters were right at the top of our list of sponsors.

EC: When you were trying to find money for that conference and you are doing that circuit and having those conversations, did anybody talk about the issue with the, well, not the founding conference but the one in October of 1960 when Bayard was invited and then uninvited because of AFL-CIO money?

ET: No. Who would have talked about that?

EC: I didn't know if, within the organization—I mean, Jim knew about it. He wasn't there for it. Julian [Bond] would have been somebody who was around for it.

ET: Yeah. But I was asking people in Washington for funds.

EC: So you wouldn't have been around.

ET: Nobody briefed me on that. But I will get back to that Washington liberal establishment before our business here is finished today.

EC: You have more to say? [Laughs] So you opened that SNCC D.C. office in Fall '63, then?

ET: I would say so.

EC: And then that conference, I know, was just after Kennedy was assassinated, like in Thanksgiving.

ET: November, something like that.

EC: I think it was over Thanksgiving.

ET: Right. It was a Thanksgiving conference.

EC: And at that point did you know that you were going to be working on the FDP Challenge?

ET: The FDP didn't exist.

EC: I was going to say, they were still working out the details for the summer.

ET: The FDP didn't exist. One of the first other responsibilities we had was when Bob came to Washington, Bob Moses, and said they were planning the Summer Project. The Summer Project was when, '63 or '64?

EC: Four.

ET: Alright. But this was in fall of '63, so it would have been in the spring of '64, Bob came. And said they had made a decision after discussion with Robert Spike and the rabbis and so-and-so and they were going to inundate the states with these northern volunteers because the movement had come to a stalemate. And what had been happening. All the killings that had taken place up to that point were of local people, because I think there was a policy not to kill the volunteers because they had congressmen up north. And like Bob came with the phone number to the Justice Department. And besides which, the SNCC workers—the northerners, the outsiders—couldn't vote. So their concern was to suppress the vote, as it still is to this very day, to suppress the vote in the black community, and how do you do that? You kill the people who can vote. You kill the leaders and you intimidate the rest. So, and it was after the murder of Louis Allen that I think Bob decided to have a summer project and bring in

people to break that logjam.

So my job was to take him around the place to all these pockets of progressive thought and liberal influence, ADA, Americans for Democratic Action, this kind of stuff. That think-tank over there on Wisconsin Avenue—Policy Studies. Institute for Policy Studies. Right. Places like that. And I was taking Bob around. And I think this meeting was at the Institute, and there were a lot of progressive congressional aides, there were a lot of younger people, they called the people together from the Institute. I would never have had all those contacts. A lot of people in the labor union who were said to be progressive. Center of progressive thought.

And Bob says, "Well, what we're thinking of doing is creating a political party, after the freedom vote, which they had just had, called the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. And we are going to go to the convention in Atlantic City and challenge the regular Democrats." People said, "Whoa! What a dramatic idea. What a brilliant idea. What a bold idea. But how is it going to be done? It will require incredible organizing. Where are the resources going to come from? [02:05:00] Can you organize such a party and survive?" All of these were very intelligent kinds of doubts and questions. "And besides which, the national Democratic Party will never tolerate you in Atlantic City. So it's quixotic. It's doomed to failure."

So they were going back and forth. "So maybe we would support such a thing, but what does Johnson—" and Johnson was the uncrowned king of the political world at that time, having taken over from Kennedy and done so well. "What's LBJ going to say about it? What's the Democratic Party going to say? You'll never be seated in Atlantic City. It's quixotic." And that was the tenor of the conversation. And then Bob said, and then

somebody said, "You know, if you really want to get a reading on this, you'd better discuss it with Jo Rauh." And Bob says, "Well, I just left Joe Rauh's office, and he said we could be seated." "What!? Joe Rauh said what?" He said, "Joe Rauh said we could be seated. He thought we could be seated."

The whole mood in the meeting changed: "Well, if Joe Rauh said that, then maybe there's a possibility. Maybe we have to look at this thing again." And then people began to make commitments of support, just on the basis of Bob saying that Joe Rauh said we could have been seated, because he was a very powerful beltway politician in the internal politics of the Democratic Party and the liberal forces in Washington, D.C. I remember that very distinctly.

And then we started organizing support for the Challenge. I mean not for the Challenge, for the Summer Project. And we started recruiting people. And we recruited a lot of people from NAG to go down in the Summer Project. Stokely and Courtland did. I was in the office. They came through the office. We recruited Ralph Featherstone. One of the other things the office used to do was to raise food and clothes for the people who were being kicked off the land. From the surrounding suburbs and from the supermarkets, we'd put the stick-up on Safeway and Stop and Shop and places like that. And we'd gather this food and these clothes, we'd sort the clothes, and we'd get boxes and boxes of food, canned food and stuff, and we'd send them down in a truck. And the Teamsters would send one of their truck drivers to drive the truck down for us, and they would also help us get the half-track to do it. So that was one of the activities of the office.

And this was being done, and I am going to talk about the High School Friends of SNCC. You ever heard of the High School Friends of SNCC? You should. That woman

who organized the anniversary conference, Sharlene Kranz, was one of the High School Friends of SNCC. And there were young white people who lived in the suburbs, whose parents were probably employees of the federal government or professional people. And they were a great group of high school kids. I really loved them. We had some little schemes that we used to work. Couldn't do that in Washington any more. So they used to come in—they used to collect the food and clothes, they used to help make the appeals to various people. We would appeal to churches, we would appeal to schools. And everybody would have a collection. We'd collect it, come to the office. We'd sort it, we'd send it.

One of the people who shared our office was the Committee for Miners, led by a Scotsman named Hamish St. Clair. Their Washington representative was a young guy named Joel Drexler, and we gave them space in the SNCC office because they didn't have nothing. And this was when in Hazard, Kentucky, there was a huge miners' strike against the coal miners and stuff like that. And one day, Joel decided he was going to bring a group of miners, people active in the strike. And about ten or so of these hillbillies came. They would talk, like, "Hi, sheriff." Like the Sheriff of Nottingham. Some of their language was Elizabethan, you know? And they talked about "hills and dales" and "down in the holler." Sure enough Scots-Irish hillbillies. And I really liked those guys. They asked me to come and start the SNCC Project in Hazard, Kentucky. Which I took to Foreman, but he said no dice and it's probably just as well. They were shooting.

[02:10:00] And when they came in, I said, "Okay, Joel, I'll take them to dinner. And there was a black restaurant, it was supposed to be the most fancy black restaurant,

called The Keys Restaurant. Down on U St. in Washington. And I took them there, and we went inside to eat, and we are at the table. And I said, "You guys can have a drink on SNCC." And I am sitting next to one of the guys, toothless, wizened little guy. And I'll never forget. He ordered, a what do you call them hamburger steaks? Hamburger steaks, what do you call them?

JB: I don't know.

EC: Like—

JB: Like a shish kebob?

ET: No, like a hamburger that is cooked and they serve it like a steak.

EC: I know what you're saying. It's on the tip of my tongue, which doesn't help.

ET: Let's pause and get this word.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

ET: [To JB] Your eminence?

JB: We are recording now. We have the word.

ET: A good man to work with. Ok. This little guy ordered a Salisbury Steak, mashed potatoes, and some green peas. And his meal came. And it sat in front of him while he just looked at it. And a tear ran down his cheek. I looked and him, I says, I didn't know what was going on with the guy. "Is something wrong, sir?" He says, "Nah, it's just like this is the best mess I've had in two year." Best mess is what he called it, best meal I've had in two years. So when they left, I said, "Shit, the people from Mississippi won't mind." I said, "Load up their van with as much food from the drive to Mississippi as we can spare." And we just loaded it up. Lots of canned beans and stuff like that and sent them back to Hazard, Kentucky. And they allowed us, "Oh, it would be a good thang if

SNCC were to set up a project back there." Well, that never went very far.

EC: Didn't some white workers go into Hazard a couple of years later down the road, working with Anne Braden, maybe?

ET: If so, I don't know anything about it but SNCC didn't start a project there. And if we were going to start the project—at that time we didn't have the white folks' project—but if we were going to start the project that would have been how to do it.

EC: I think eventually one of the legacies of the white folks' project went in there, but I'm not sure.

ET: That would have been some years down the road. Alright, so where are we now?

EC: Did you interview potential volunteers to go into Mississippi?

ET: Oh yeah. Oh! You got me back on the subject. So the High School Friends of SNCC used to come in, to sort and pack up the food and clothes to go down. But they were a rambunctious bunch of high school students, well meaning and I loved them all. I said, "Y'all get to get this shit organized." And this black guy who was teaching school came in, said he wanted to see what he could do. I said, "Here's what you can do. Take control of that bunch of rascals over there and get them organized to get these food and clothes going to Mississippi. Old people need it. And he took control and he organized them. And he had a way of reasoning with them, and he had a way of being firm with them, but he was obviously a splendid organizer with a sort of quiet authority to him. You know who I'm talking about right? That's Ralph Featherstone.

And Feather must have organized many truckloads of food and sent to Mississippi, and then came the Summer Project, and Feather—he was married, and he

was a little bit older. He had been an all-city point guard, a high school player, and he had graduated from college and he was teaching school, I think at a middle school or something like that. And he said to me, "Mike, I think I want to go to Mississippi on this project." I said, "Feather, ain't you married?" And unlike the rest of the SNCC people, he was a young man who had started his career. He had a teaching job. I said, "Let's go talk." So we went out the office and we sat on the curb, looking at the FBI car that was always parked across the street. And I said, "Feather, you know, there's a hell of a good chance that everybody who goes down there ain't coming back." [02:15:00] He said, "Well, it's my people and it's my people's struggle and if that's the way it goes, that's the way it goes." I said, "Alright, brother." He accepted. And he left to go to the orientation in Oxford [Ohio], and on the way down to Mississippi after the orientation, after [Michael] Schwerner, [Andrew] Goodman, and [James] Chaney had disappeared, a lot of the cars came through Washington.

I remember I developed a lot of respect for progressive Jewish people. Because one car came— Oh, after Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney had disappeared, I walked into my office, that's the SNCC Washington office, and all these very nicely dressed, attractive youngish-to-middle-aged women had taken over. They're saying, "Call so-and-so! My husband gave him $500 for his last campaign. Call him. He will answer us. And call so-and-so." And they're calling congressmen, which is my job. So I stand up in the corner of the office, and nobody pays any attention to me. And I'm saying, "This is my office and all these people done took over." And these are mothers from Long Island, and they're all Jewish as a matter of fact. And I said, "Damn, they're getting through to congresspeople I've never been able to speak to, so let me just stand there and watch

them work."

And then one of the cars going down to Mississippi stopped to check in at the office, and this big, dark-haired, curly-haired, good-looking kid came walking into the office and he looks in the back and he says, "Mom! What are you doing here?" And she looked up, she says, "Abe! What are you doing here?" And he said, "I'm going down to Mississippi," and she ran and hugged him and kissed him. And I said, "Damn. Because my mother had been burning up the telephone lines from Jamaica: 'If you go to Mississippi, Mike, you will get killed.'" She didn't know what Mississippi was but somebody who had known some knowledge in Jamaica must have told her. She said, "If you go to Mississippi, I will get the FIB after you!"

EC: [Laughs]

ET: I said, "You're going to get the FIB after me, are you, mom?" I said, "But I am not going. It's ok. I got to work here in Washington." So I was very struck by that mother, who just kissed her son and said, "You know, go with God, God bless you," and sent him off to Mississippi and seemed so proud of him.

EC: Was it hard not to go to Mississippi?

ET: Mm-hmm. Well, my mother was threatening to get the FIB after me, so. When I finally got there, I didn't—by the time I got to Mississippi, they sent me back to Washington. I'll never forget that.

EC: What happened?

ET: [Lawrence] Guyot met me as soon as I walked into the meeting. I said, "No, I am going to Mississippi." I wanted to be a field organizer. I wanted to wear the blue jeans and run from the sheriff and do all the romantic kinds of things. And Kuntsler, Arthur

Kinoy, and Bill Kuntsler, they met me. Said, "Mike, just the man we're looking for!" I said, "What?" Because I had turned over the SNCC office to Jim Monsonis. "You're going back to Washington." I said, "What for?" "You're going back to Washington to start the MFDP office." I said, "Goddammit." "We're challenging the Mississippi congressmen, you've got to go back and start the office." So I had to turn around and go all the way back to Washington.

EC: Was that at the end of the summer? Was that after the summer?

ET: Yeah. After the end of the summer.

EC: So you thought you had done your turn and you could get into the field?

JB: I'm going to close the file.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

ET: Oh, I didn't finish the Feather story.

JB: Ok, we are still rolling again.

ET: I got distracted. So another car headed south, after the Jewish mother and her son had so moved me. Stopped. And who should burst in the office but Ralph, with a big smile on his face and his chest all puffed out. I'd never seen him so happy and so exhilarated and so energized. He said, "Guess what, Mike? I'm assistant director of the Freedom Schools." Well, what's interesting about that was in the short time of the orientation, which was about a week at the most, the people up there working had picked up the abilities of Ralph. And Ralph was made assistant director of the Freedom Schools. And he was the operative director, [02:20:00] because, what's the name of this guy?

EC: Staughton Lynd?

ET: Staughton Lynd. I don't think he was in Mississippi over the summer. He had

helped write some of the things and write down the formulations of the committee, but it was Ralph who ran it. And his chest was all puffed up, he was so proud.

And then a very good friend of mine, whom Ralph introduced me to, later on when I was running the MFDP office. Ralph comes into the office with this really long, red-haired white kid, white young man. He said, "Mike, I done brought you something." I said, "What?" He said, "Here. He's coming to work in your office. He was a volunteer in Neshoba County." And Ralph was working in Neshoba County after the disappearance of those people. And that's when I met my best friend. He was a very, very smart guy. He was a philosophy graduate student at Yale, Stuart Hampshire's brightest student. And he went to Mississippi and stayed over, and he really loved Mississippi, and he was a very perceptive guy. His perceptions of black culture and everything. And he worked in the office for a while. Very funny.

One time, we'd had some victory in the Challenge and we went out to celebrate, and our office was down in Southwest Washington, close to Capitol Hill. So we went to this little restaurant, which was really this hillbilly restaurant. And we had dinner and a couple of drinks, and then had a couple more drinks, and it was my friend Allen, Guyot—who as you know weighed 300 pounds—Jan Goodman, who would be a great person for you to interview. She is a very, very smart woman. She had more political experience certainly than I had. She used to work in presidential campaigns. And she was the assistant coordinator of the MFDP office for the Challenge. Jan Goodman, she's now a lawyer in New York, live in the Village. So there was Allen, myself, Lawrence Guyot, and Jan Goodman. There was four of us. So we had dinner, and we had a drink, and we had another drink, and we were talking about things that were taking place in the housing

administration committee, and we were talking about Capitol Hill gossip, things people inside the Beltway talk about, and we were getting quite relaxed.

So I had two or three drinks, maybe three or four, I don't know how many. It was four hours. But when the bill came, it was $45. That was a lot of money. And I felt downright guilty to be using that much of the movement's money to be having three or four drinks in this white restaurant. It was a working-class, hillbilly restaurant. And I said, "Oh my God, look at the bill. How much money you got?" I might have had $6 on me. Allen might have had $4. And we finally got—but when we pooled our giant resources, the bill was like $45, and we had about $25. So I said, "Well, the only thing we can do is to place the $26 we have on the table, and run like hell for the door." And Guyot says, "Well, Mr. Chairman, I want to associate myself with those sentiments." And my friend, Allen, whom Ralph had introduced us, looked up and said, "Mr. Chairman, as much as you might want to embrace those sentiments, I doubt very much you're going to be able to implement them." And we all cracked up laughing, and Guyot said, "Not to worry about it." And he reached into his pocket and he had been to a black church fundraiser, and he had an envelope of dollar bills in there, so he peeled off another $20 and put it on there. Money was contributed to the MFDP for the Challenge, and it's the only time we ever ripped off any money from the movement, that $20 to settle the bill. "Well, Mr. Chairman, much as you might want to associate yourself with those sentiments"—looking at his girth, he says—"I doubt very much you will be able to implement them." [02:25:00] [Laughter]

EC: I was thinking about Jim Farmer's story about how he doesn't have to be the fastest. He just has to be able to out run. Guyot probably would have been at the back of

the pack.

ET: Absolutely. So, where were we?

JB: We're on a roll again.

EC: Can you talk about what it was like to work on the Atlantic City Challenge? Your job in D.C. and the work that summer?

ET: Well. I left. I mean, I made initial contacts, I think. I always worked in D.C. I didn't travel. A lot of the organizing had to do with going to the state conventions and getting commitment from the Democratic delegation that they would go a certain way. But prior to that time, one had to make contact with the congressmen in Washington. And through the congressmen and through our supporters in the state we had to learn about who the key local activists were to go organize. But I was organizing the Congress. And my main job, because once the Summer Project became known, a wave of propaganda swept through the Beltway, and it was essentially what the Mississippi crackers were saying. And it was what the incipient Right, because they weren't as well-developed as they are now, were saying. "It's a totally quixotic action that was doomed to failure, and if it's not doomed to failure, it's not a good faith action. "They pretend," they being us, "they pretend they're going down there to do education, culture centers, but they're really going down there to disrupt the state and to embarrass the state of Mississippi and the national government, like the Freedom Riders did. So it's really a very cynical procedure on our part. And number three, what these cynical activists, most adventurous, trying to do is to get white Americans down here to get them killed. And young American students down there to get them killed." Which incensed the hell out of me in the office because I mean all these people, my colleagues, the people I had met in my work, they were

American students, and they were decent and well-meaning people and the last thing they wanted to do was kill anybody. And why instead of talking about the terrorists who are doing the killing, they're talking about the potential victims? I mean it was really perverse.

And people like [Rowland] Evans and [Robert] Novak were writing that. People like that guy who is supposed to be the Dean of Washington columnists [David Broder]. One of them was gay. It was two brothers. Yeah, you know who I mean. And they are nationally syndicated. And even Drew Pearson got involved in a very curious way. And that's another story that probably needs to be told. And all that propaganda started being put out against the Summer Project.

EC: How did you try to combat it?

ET: Well, as best we could. I didn't know. I could see what the columnists were writing. What was the name of that other guy besides—Evans and Novak were kind of rabble-rousers but this guy was [coughs] austere, and had gravitas. What the fuck was his name? Two brothers. And their names are all over the history [Joseph and Stewart Alsop].

EC: So, I'd recognize them, if you said it.

ET: Where did I last see him? A story either about Jackie Kennedy or Eleanor Roosevelt, to whom he was a great advisor and confidant. That's the level at which these motherfuckers moved. And came out and said flat out that he had clear proof and evidence that what SNCC was trying to do was to create martyrs. I was trying to lure people down there to get them killed to embarrass the country.

So, [02:30:00] at the same time this is being said, there is a campaign of

vilification taking place in Mississippi, saying the state is going to be invaded. That these people are disease-ridden, syphilitic people coming to infect white women with various sexually transmitted diseases. That they are Communists being financed by Castro and Cuba. And the state is passing all this draconian, absurd legislation in a special session. "It's illegal to rent a room to a visiting white person traveling with a black person." All kinds of—They are buying tanks and tear gas dispensers, and that blue paint that would paint people blue so they would know who was in a demonstration. They are stockpiling shotguns and machine guns. So a real crisis atmosphere is being created in the state. And then the Klan is burning crosses every weekend. And then the media down there, the radio talk shows and the print media, the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger,* the *Jackson Daily News*, are publishing all these very inciting comments and nothing else is appearing in the Mississippi media. Demonizing the volunteers, whom I'm up in Washington recruiting and I know them to be the best young Americans you can find. Very earnest and well meaning. But creating an atmosphere where if you're just an ordinary, young white Mississippian boy, brought up on the rhetoric of the Lost Cause and the Confederate whatever-it-is, and southern patriotism, then you would conclude very strongly that your patriotic duty as a young white person was to kill these invaders, who were coming to completely disrupt the state, besmirch white womanhood, and spread Communism and disease. If such a person were coming to my state, I would want to off them, too, right?

And then we discovered that a version of this was being circulated among liberals. Some young white woman at school in the Midwest sent us a letter than her father's best friend sent to him when he called and said, "My daughter is thinking about going to

Mississippi to work on voter registration and education, working at a Freedom School. It seems like a good thing. What do you think?" And this guy wrote and said, "That's the rhetoric of what they're saying. That's not what they intend. They just want to get young white students killed." And this person was very important in the Democratic Party. I can't remember who it was, or what his exact title was, but he was a mover and a shaker in Washington and I said, "Damn, if the establishment is saying this shit, we need to counter it." And we called press conferences, and we'd do whatever, and nobody would show up, or very few people would show up. Every time we called a press conference, the White House decided they would call a press conference, so the political press were like, "Are you going to the SNCC office, or are you going to go to the White House?" And so we were stymied in that way.

And that is where I remember, so one of the things we started to do is say, "Look. All this provocative, very dangerous, incendiary rhetoric and mobilization has taken place inside this state, and the country is paying no attention. So we got to get some congressmen, some decent congressmen, maybe Adam Clayton Powell, who was a committee chairman or somebody. He wouldn't do it. I don't know if I got to talk to him. But to talk to congresspeople to see if there can be a congressional hearing on the circumstances in Mississippi, in which case the media would have to attend. And if they got the right witnesses, if they got black people to come and testify, if they got SNCC people to come and testify, there is no way this story can be suppressed. So that was part of my job, working for the Summer Project.

EC: Is that when you wrote that letter to Lorraine Hansberry? Was that that hearing?

ET: I am getting to that.

EC: Sorry.

ET: [02:35:00] I am getting to that. I was speaking to people like Congressman Ryan, a couple liberal congressmen from California. And the guy from Wisconsin—Kastenmeier. Bob Kastenmeier from Wisconsin. Interesting thing is, that editor I was talking about for the SNCC book, she married one of Kastenmeier's sons or something like that. I said, "Hey, I can tell you something about your father-in-law." But I was in his office—or she was engaged to him—young guy, you know. And I started to recount everything that was being said in the media, everything that the Klan was doing. Everything that the mayor of Jackson was doing, that the political leadership of the state was doing, and what the media was saying. And I kept saying, you know, "It seems more and more to me that if this continues, there is going to be killings, maybe even a bloodbath. There is going to be violence." They are programming for that. And as I went on, just adducing evidence: and this happened, and this has been happening, and this has been happening. I saw Kastenmeier's head start moving down, and moving down, and moving down like a burden was on his shoulders. By the time I finished the description, his head was lying on the desk. He was lying on the desk like this. And so I says, "Congressman, we've got to have a congressional hearing." "We'll never get a hearing through," he said. "The White House is opposed to it. And the Democratic leadership is opposed to it."

EC: Were they opposed because of the upcoming Challenge?

ET: There was no Challenge at this point. Oh, you mean the Challenge in Atlantic City. I don't think anybody took that really real. It's just that, business as usual and

congressional privilege. And they were pushing out the position that, "It's really agitators coming." And also that in a great many congressional committees, Dixiecrats because of their longevity had senior roles in there. I mean, look. There was five Mississippi congressmen that we were trying to unseat, and between the five of them I think they had 235 years seniority, or something like that. It was some unheard-of figure. Simply because after you won those lily-white primaries, you get elected to the office and it's a lifetime job. So they were able to jam things up in the Congress. And that was why we said, "Okay, if we can't get the congressional hearing, we should try and get our own hearing." And that later you saw to Lorraine Hansberry. And I could go get it and read from it if you want it in the record. But that's what we did.

And what we did was, we got Bob and the people in the Mississippi Movement to get a bunch of local people, black people. I don't think we found any white witnesses. And we rented the National Theater in Washington. And we contacted a lot of prominent American citizens. I remember Norman Mailer, I called him up to come, and he, you know, he was a very good guy. He had a Brooklyn accent. He said, "Geez, you know, I'd love to do that. I'd really want to do that, but maybe it's not really in your best interest. My reputation ain't really so good these days." He had just stabbed his wife. He said, "So my presence there might not serve your purposes." [Laughter] I said, "Thank you. Mr. Mailer." And I respected him for that.

So what we did was, we got these people from Mississippi to testify, Mrs. Hamer of course being prominent among them. Hartman Turnbow being prominent among them. Mr. Miles, Mr. Steptoe. Mr. Steptoe's a great story. You know the story I mean?

EC: Um-mmm.

ET: You know Mr. Steptoe was little, about five foot four or something like that and very slightly built. And the sheriff down in Amite County was this huge, big redneck. And this was after they killed Herbert Lee for leading voter registration in Amite County, Mississippi. Mr. Steptoe takes down a second group of people, black people, to go and register to vote. And Mr. Steptoe, again, slight, almost petite guy. But brave as a lion, as a group of marines. [02:40:00] He is going into the courthouse and the sheriff comes looming over him and puts his hand on his gun, and said, "Steptoe! State your business. What are you doing here?" You remember Mr. Steptoe's answer? Mr. Steptoe says, "Well, Sheriff, if I live, I'm going to register to vote." And at that point, the answer to that question wasn't clear, whether Mr. Steptoe would live, right?

EC: Yeah.

ET: So we brought him up to testify. Anne Moody came. She brought two young men, two beautiful young guys, about 14 and 12 years old, who testified about being put in the Stockade. They were some of the best witnesses and we got these distinguished Americans. It was in the National Theater. And we either hired stenographers to write it down or we made a tape recording, one or the other. But a transcript was developed, just like a congressional hearing, and it was published just like a congressional hearing. The transcript of those hearings is something I wish I had saved a copy of. That's the kind of stuff we used to do. That's the kind of stuff we used to do in preparation for the Summer Project.

EC: You said earlier that there was a memo you'd really like to have a copy of.

ET: That's the Voting Rights Act memo.

EC: Okay. So I'll hold off on that, but let me ask you. I'm stumbling over my

questions. Ms. [Ella] Baker worked on the Atlantic City Challenge out of the Washington office, right?

EC: Yes, Ms. Baker came up. By then—I did that initial work, but when the summer begun I left the office, and Jim Monsonis took over, and Mrs. Baker came up and started doing a lot of traveling, I gather, to the various state conventions and stuff like that, and carrying the message in that way. Had I remained in the office I would probably have done some of that. But you know there is also the question of my very clear and evident Jamaican accent. I am not an American citizen. So it seemed like it wasn't the smartest thing or the most effective thing for me to be running around to these various state conventions, and challenge the Mississippi delegation. I mean, "Who the hell is this foreigner?" Or, as my good friends in Mississippi put it, "funny talkin' Mike Thelwell," to be doing that.

EC: So what were you doing instead?

ET: None of your damn business.

EC: [Laughs] Alright.

ET: There was a lady. I was washing some clothes in a Laundromat in New York, and this woman, a good looking woman, with a very distinctive Russian accent, which I won't attempt to imitate, asked me if I could help her fold her clothes. And I did. And we had a conversation, and she gave me her telephone number. And I called up the number and the woman who answered had a French accent. And I said, "You can't be the person I am trying to call, because the lady I am calling has a distinctly Russian accent and I am looking for her." And she says, "Well, is there a message and can I give her the message?" She says, "She will call you back." But then the woman who called me back

had a German accent. What is going on here? Well, it turns out she was a character actress and she had all these accents down pat and she had me going like hell. So I spent a couple months, and I exiled myself from the SNCC office. I had a picture of her downstairs, too, one of her big promotion pictures, with this lady of the many accents.

EC: [Laughs] So were you around during the actual Atlantic City Challenge or were you exiled?

ET: I wasn't in Atlantic City. But I got to hear all the reports from people who were, SNCC people who came back. And I was very tempted to go to Atlantic City. But a curious sense of appropriateness and protocol—I said, "Look, I'm not working in the SNCC office any more, I'm not actually on the SNCC staff, so why would I want to push myself up in Atlantic City and present myself?" But in fact, with the movement's tone in SNCC, you didn't have to be on [02:45:00] staff. All kinds of people were showing up. If I'd gone, all my friends from NAG would have welcomed me. I said, "Why would I go up and make demands on SNCC resources, needing a place to stay and all the rest?" I'm sad I didn't have any money. I wasn't on the SNCC payroll anymore, so I was very broke. So that's why I wasn't there.

EC: And that's when you started working on the congressional Challenge?

ET: And I came back after the summer was over, after the convention Challenge was over and decided—there had been some offers of some literary people who wanted to sponsor me for a kind of literary patronage. That's really what the fuck it was. I had won a couple of national prizes for short story writing and stuff like that, and one day I'm in the dorm at Howard, and there's this very New York, sophisticated voice on the phone, a woman calling. "Mr. Thelwell?" "Yes, ma'am." I'd just won publication in one of the

story magazines. She says, "I just read your short story. It was brilliant and I would so like to handle you." I said, "You would like to handle me, Madame?" She says, "I mean, I mean your work. I mean your work." So I acquired an agent who had been Richard Wright's agent, and who gave me a very interesting letter that William Faulkner had written to Richard Wright. Very paternalistic. You want to hear about it?

Well, it essentially said was—as soon as I read it, between the lines: Faulkner was the acknowledged master of representing Mississippi reality in literature, and representing it from a white perspective. Now along comes Richard Wright, who was vaguely of the left, might have been a Communist, and is writing the same experience from a black perspective, and the two things don't mesh. So Faulkner was very much, "My son, I have read your book." And it was very much of the rhetoric of the new criticism, the kind of deification of art and the artist. "I have read your work and you appear to have talent, and I believe one day you could be an artist. And you might succeed, you might just succeed in the difficult task of becoming an artist if you will eschew hatred," and so on and so on. In other words, tone your goddamn message down and we might accept you at the high table of literary art. It went down in that vein. "But if you only can get away from hatred and recrimination, one day you may become an artist." And she gave me a copy of that letter, which I never kept. I didn't keep any of Malcolm's letters. Fuck, you know.

But anyway, I'd gone to a meeting. And at the meeting was the editor of the *Southern Review,* whose name I cannot recall right now, a writer for the *New Yorker* magazine, and this agent. This was a meeting in New York. In fact, the guy I was staying with was the editor of Crown Press, who had published my last story from this contest,

and that was a story in which, it's called "A Community of Victims," and it has to do with a young black man at a bus stop, a white woman at the bus stop, and a drunken black man who comes up and starts to aggressively approach the white lady. And then the young black guy intercedes. He's trying to save face with the black drunk, he's trying to save him from getting into trouble with the police, but he doesn't want to appear to be kissing up to the white lady either, so he's got a problem how to handle it. And at one point when they sit down on the bus, the woman touches him on his knee to get his attention and says, "Thank you." And I remember the editor of the *Southern Review* said, "That's a very intimate gesture, a very intimate gesture. Get it out, right?" [Laughter]

But anyway, I'm at this meeting and they proceed to tell me how talented I am, and how they really think I have a career as a writer. [02:50:00] And there was some talk—it really was a strategy. And I would write two or three short stories, which I would submit to the editor of the *Southern Review* and which, I guess, upon negotiation, if it was right, they would publish there. Which would be the basis of seeking a contract for me, for a novel. And then somebody had a friend who had an apartment in Venice or Naples, where I didn't speak the language, so I'd have to write, that was vacant and could be made accessible to me, available to me. And I could do this novel right quick. At this point I'd been out of Jamaica for four years. I wasn't African American by any stretch of the imagination. Well, they're not saying anything. You know, "Just write a novel, you're a talented writer, go write a novel." And so obviously what I had was patrons, literary patrons. You know, the kind of patronage and clientilism that governed the Harlem Renaissance and the black literary experience. Well that seemed very discovered, you know these three white people taking an interest in my career, telling me how talented I

was.

And at the end of which, "Blues for Mr. Charlie," [James] Baldwin's play, had been on Broadway and created a great deal of controversy, and the agent said to me, said, "Oh by the way," said to the group, I mean we are finished with discussion, "Okay, we got it. Alright, very good. Mike will write these stories, we'll get the contract, everything is in place for a literary career. To change the subject, by the way, have you seen 'Blues for Mr. Charlie?'" And a couple people said they had, one maybe said they had. And she says, "Well, it's just atrocious. Just awful. That James Baldwin is finished." Well, I had a great deal of respect for Jimmy Baldwin. "That James Baldwin is finished. In fact, I think we're ready, it's time for a new black writer." And they looked at me and smiled. And I said, "Oh, is that what's going on?" So I left and went back to Washington and called up Jim Forman. I said, "I'm coming back to SNCC." He said, "Well, come down South." So that is what happened.

EC: So where did, when he said come down South—

ET: Well, I went down to a staff meeting that was taking place. You're going to have to disconnect—

EC: John—

ET: [To JB] You've got to disconnect me, reverend!

EC: John—

JB: Oh, oh.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

ET: We were discussing what the black writer's responsibility were, and the sun was about rising in Washington, because I remember we had to go out and get liquor

from bootleggers because the stores weren't open. And Jimmy got to swaying a little bit, and said, "Well, my young brothers and sisters, here we are. I, James Baldwin, a black writer, must in some way represent you. Now, you didn't elect me, and I didn't ask for it, but there we are. But I can promise you this. If you can promise me that you will never, ever accept any of the degrading and reductive definitions of yourself and your humanity, that this republic has prepared for you, I, James Baldwin can promise you that I shall never betray you." That was the high point of that evening. I have never forgotten it. Stokely quotes it in his book. None of us who were there forgot it. And Jimmy never did.

So when this woman says, you know—it's probably not on the tape—that James Baldwin is finished, we're ready for a new black writer, I knew I just had to get my ass out of there, you know, and not go back. I think it was when the Carmichael book came out, or it could have been when *The Harder They Come* came out, I got a phone call from the same lady saying, "Michael Thelwell, I thought I was your agent."

EC: [Laughs]

ET: I hadn't spoken to the lady for 20 years!

EC: [Laughs] But she wanted a claim.

ET: She wanted to reestablish the professional relationship, I guess.

EC: So did you work in the South for a while, or did you immediately get sent back on the—

ET: On the next plane. [02:55:00] I get to the meeting. It may have been the meeting. It could have been at Waveland. Or it could have been the one at the seminary in Atlanta, you can check which one it was. After the conventional Challenge—

EC: After the convention Challenge? That would have been Gammon

[Theological Seminary].

ET: Yeah, Gammon, okay. So it was the theological seminary in Atlanta, that's where it was. And as soon as I walked in, I barely had time to flirt with two or three of the volunteers, and Guyot and Kuntsler and Kennard came bearing down on me. "Mike, we've been looking for you, we've been looking for you. We need you." I said, "What? What?" "You got to go back to Washington. Start an office there for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party." Gave me $200 to start the office and sent me back to Washington.

EC: Guyot wasn't going to have you in Mississippi with him.

ET: And I went back to Washington for the Challenge. Cut the tape.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

JB: The Challenge vote.

EC: So the congressional Challenge.

ET: So Guyot handed me $200 in cash and said, "Go rent an office, and equip it, and get ready because we're going to challenge." Now, it's important to understand the Challenge strategy. The practice of challenging seats in Congress really began with Reconstruction, where a lot of southern delegations were coming up, and Republicans were challenging them, or Republicans were coming up and Democrats would challenge them as to whether they truly represented the state or they truly had won legitimate access to the seats they were going. And to do that, a process was developed. First of all, that Congress is the only judge of its own legitimacy. So you couldn't challenge for a seat in court. You couldn't go to a federal court and file a lawsuit and say, "I am the true representative." It's all predicated on a vote in Congress.

Which means that ultimately it's a political decision and it's all predicated on who has the majority in the Congress. And if you're a minority party, if your party don't control a majority in the House, there's no point you going and challenging for the seat because they are going to out vote you. And the Democrats had a huge majority. I mean, in 1964, when we were doing it, '65, Democrats had a huge majority. That's number one. Number two, Congress is the only judge. And the next element is, the only person who can challenge the seat of any elected member or any member claiming to be elected, is somebody who also ran in the election and is challenging for the seat. So you had to have been a candidate. And then if such a candidate comes forward, the only way you can challenge the seat is if the Congress convenes and the speaker says, "All rise" to be sworn in. And as the Congress is rising, you have to have another congressperson, who represents your interests, rise first and say, "Mr. Chairman," get the attention of the chair. And the chair would say, "Why does the gentleman rise?" He says, "I rise to challenge the seats of Representative Crosby of Mississippi for X and O reasons."

And once that protocol takes place, then the challenge goes into effect. And then what next follows from that, if you get the attention of the chair and you challenge the seating, the chair then says to the challenged congressman, "Please step aside." Why does he say that?

EC: Because he can't take the seat until it's investigated?

ET: Not 'til its investigated. You can take the seat at the will of Congress, but there's no Congress until they're sworn in. They can't do shit. So you step aside, they swear the body, and then the body can just turn around and vote, "He's the representative," and you sit back down. Five minutes is all the time it would take. Or the

body might vote, "He ain't the representative." Or, "There's a real challenge here," in which case, a process is then put into motion. [03:00:00] The challenger gets his document and his evidence and is sent to the House Committee on Internal Affairs. The guy claiming the seat, who has been certified presumably by the party in control in that state, he sends his credentials and his evidence, and the House committee threshes it out and votes on it. They could either vote that the challenge has no validity, in which case the congressman who was sent forward with the credentials would be seated. That can happen in a week or ten days, happen very shortly. Or they can vote that the challenge has validity. And presumably they could vote that the challenger is entitled to the seat, but that's just the committee. And when the committee makes that determination, they send it to the complete House, who settles the issue. But that's the only way a seat in the House can be challenged.

There is another stipulation, or another process which is involved. And that is, if the House doesn't seat the challenged party, and says that the challenge should be sent to the House committee to be adjudicated, the challenger can go into the constituency and seek depositions from every election official, from every elected official, from local people. And those depositions, his right to seek those depositions, has the power of subpoena. So these people have to come, have to answer the questions, have to give testimony and that testimony could be then sent to the House. But that whole process is not triggered unless the House so votes after the challenged congresspeople have stood down, alright? You follow that?

EC: Yes.

ET: So what do you need to challenge the seating?

JB: One congressman to stand up.

ET: No prior to that, what do you need?

EC: People to run.

ET: You need people claiming. Somebody's got to claim the seat. You've got to have challengers who had run to claim the seat. Now, in Mississippi at that time, there was no way any black person could get on the ballot, because you'd have to go through the primary, or you'd have to go through the nomination process and be accepted by the state to put you on the official ballot. So that was out of the question, unless, a) you won the Democratic primary, or you won the Republican primary and got put on the slate. And both of those parties were at that time lily-white. So the only way we could get challengers was to run people in a freedom election. Well, a freedom election has no official status, so what would cause the House of Representatives or anybody else to accept it as being a legitimate challenger? So you can see it's a very uphill struggle.

But after the convention Challenge in Atlantic City, which ended with incredible bad will and recriminations and with SNCC being abused as trying to torpedo the election of Lyndon Johnson, trying to destroy the Democratic Party, of not understanding politics, of being politically naive, or being politically sinister, whichever one you prefer. And we were absolutely *persona non grata* and the pariahs of beltway politics and internal politics of the state. And that's the situation in which Guyot is sending me back into Washington to go challenge these seatings. But Guyot, bless his heart, also had a sense of irony and subversiveness. Because after we left Atlantic City, being abused by every facet of the Democratic Party possible, and even by some of our old allies—we were abused by [03:05:00] Robert Speck of the National Council of Churches. He thought that

our political acumen left a lot to be desired, or that we weren't dependable people to work with politically. He wasn't sure. He came back over at a meeting we called in Washington, or he invited us to a meeting and we went and he was surprised that we went. But to go back to Washington representing the MFDP is like to go to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, say you're representing the Nazi Party, right? I mean, it wasn't a popular thing to do.

But right after the convention when all this recrimination is being heaped on our head, Guyot went down to Mississippi and recruited Mrs. Hamer, Mrs. [Victoria] Gray, Mrs. [Annie] Divine to run in the second district, the third district, and I believe the fifth. And printed up all these posters that he declared, he said, "We weren't seated in Atlantic City, but we have undying loyalty to the Democratic Party. We have undying loyalty to the ticket." And we are going to campaign in support of the ticket, which gave me a lot of fun. Because what is going to happen now is that the whole Democratic Party in Mississippi, the whole Dixiecrat party is going to support Goldwater and support the conservatives. And maybe the labor union down there, the AFL-CIO and a few liberals are supporting the Democrats. But the only people who are supporting the Democrats forthrightly is the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

EC: Most of whom can't vote.

ET: Most of whom can't vote. That's the other thing. And second of all, to outrightly support the Democratic national ticket is the kiss of death in Mississippi. So I'll never forget. We had these posters printed up. Lyndon Johnson at the top of the ticket. Hubert Humphrey underneath him. And beneath him there was in the second district, which was Fannie Lou Hamer. MFDP candidates was what we called them. I

remember writing a letter to the Democratic National Committee in the campaign, saying, you know, we understand that the president and the vice president are very busy campaigning all over the country, but we are the only group element of the Democratic Party supporting the national ticket in the state. Here are out campaign materials. Sent them these posters. And even if the president himself can't come, we would be very encouraged in our effort to support the national ticket if Mrs. Johnson would come. We would sponsor her in a talk, right? For some reason we didn't get no answer.

EC: [Laughs] Y'all are rough.

ET: Sad, sad, sad. But anyway, so we ran these freedom election campaigns, took a freedom vote, not part of the official vote, and the MFDP ticket, let by Lyndon Johnson, Herbert Humphrey. And in our vote Lyndon Johnson and Herbert Humphrey carried the state, confidently.

EC: [Laughs]

ET: As did Mrs. Hamer, Mrs. Gray, and Mrs. Divine. They won seats. And it was on then basis of this, we were going to go challenge the election. Now, Joe Rauh, who was the UAW's chief attorney and also was president of Americans for Democratic Action, and also was co-chairman of—what's that coalition called? [Pause]

Coming out of the convention, the liberal organizations, the labor organizations, and particularly Joe, who by the way had written our brief for the convention Challenge. Remember I told you the story of when Joe Rauh said we can be seated and he might write the brief? The whole meeting turned? So he felt not without reason but quite wrongly that the only reason we had even got in the door at Atlantic City was because of his agency and patronage. Actually, we got in the door because of Goodman, Chaney,

and Schwerner, because we took all those things to the state conventions. And all these northern states that had young volunteers in Mississippi in the Summer Project, who all we contacted them and they rushed to the state conventions [03:10:00] to talk about what their experiences were. So the murders of Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney had given us a great deal of currency. People understood it.

So even without Joe Rauh's considerable influence, and his having written the brief, we would have still had some momentum and currency to get into the convention. We'd have had support in the delegations, right? Michigan, California, New York, places like that. And I won't recapitulate here the whole story of the various votes on the credentials committee and how people's votes were turned around. You know that. But they felt that we were ungrateful, apolitical, didn't understand patronage and responsibility, and were irresponsible. Joe Rauh felt that very strongly. I remember when I got back to Washington. I was in the office then. I was in the FDP office, right. I got this bill for maybe $1,000, which was a lot of money, for the printing of the briefs. So I called up Joe, who is a powerful, well-connected liberal, and said, "Mr. Rauh, I have here a bill for your brief which was presented in Atlantic City. And the MFDP never ordered any printing. I didn't order any printing. You must have ordered it. So can I send you the bill? He said, "No, you're independent. It's your brief. You pay for it." And he hung up the phone. I said, "Goddamn. He knows how fucking poor we are."

So that wasn't my first conversation with Joe Rauh. My first conversation with Joe Rauh should have taught me what Beltway politics is all about. When I was in the SNCC office, Bill Gregory—no it wasn't Gregory, it was the other guy, doctor. Other black comedian, who was also in *I, Spy* as an FBI agent. Bill Cosby? Bill Cosby.

JB: Bill Cosby was in it.

ET: Right. Bill Cosby had agreed to do a benefit for us. Some lady knew him. Very attractive lady, so she might have known him in the biblical sense of the word. She said, "There's this great young black comic and he's got a TV series on ABC coming up, and he's very funny. I think I can get him to do a benefit for you." So we had Bill Cosby doing the benefit. And we got Cramton Auditorium at Howard. And SNCC was very broke, and we'd sold out all the tickets, so there was about $5,000 coming in for it, and we needed it very badly. And some guy calls, you know, from some branch of the District of Columbia government, maybe the agency that deals with charitable contributions and says that we are not registered as a charitable organization. We have no business having the concert and if we go ahead and have the concert, I will be in violation of the law and he's going to go ahead and imprison me. I said, "Goddamn it. SNCC needs this money, the concert is going to be in three days, we have Cramton Auditorium, and this man is saying if we have the concert, I am going to jail. What the hell am I going to do?"

And then somebody says, "Call up Joe Rauh." I said, "Who the hell is Joe Rauh?" This was earlier, you know, when I was at SNCC, not MFDP. They said, "He's the most powerful liberal in the District. He will be able to help you." I don't know if that person who told me that was a plant, but he gave me the number. So I called it and I said, "Mr. Rauh, my name is Mike Thelwell. I am the coordinator of the SNCC Washington office. "Oh, hello, Mike, what can I do for you?" I said, "Well, sir, the organization is strapped. It's broke. We have a concert coming up, a benefit by Bill Cosby. We have sold out all the tickets and I got a phone call from somebody in the District of Columbia's

government, saying that if we have the concert I am going to jail. I'll be in violation of the law." And I should have paid close attention to what Joe Rauh said to me. He said, "Well, Mike. I never saw a situation yet that couldn't be fixed. Let me get on it." And that's the last I [03:15:00] heard of my going to jail. We had the concert, SNCC got the money, and that's the last I heard of it.

Now, what I suspect was that this was all a fraud. That whoever called me up pretending to be, purporting to be from the District government, was Joe Rauh's man. Whoever told me and gave me his number was Joe Rauh's man. And what we wanted was patronage. He wanted me to be grateful to him. "Well, Mike. I never saw a situation that couldn't be fixed. I'll take care of it." And it disappeared, right? That's his attitude: there's no situation that can't be fixed. I didn't understand it at the time. It was much later it occurs to me that that's what happened.

Alright. I go back to Washington. People aren't actually spitting on me but they aren't talking to me. And I have to go to the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights to represent MFDP. And I guess Monsonis, or whoever it is is going to represent SNCC. Or for some reason I was representing both organizations at the LCDC the leadership conference, LCCR. Now what that is, is an organization of the national representatives, the lead lobbyists. The chairman is always Clarence Mitchell and the general executive secretary is always Joe Rauh. The red haired lady who represents the UAW is always there. She's a UAW lobbyist. She's the one who brought John Conyers around to introduce him when he got elected that year. National Council on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches. Their lobbyist is there. The Methodist Organization on Religion and Race. Their lobbyist is there. And a host of other organizations. There might

have been 90 of them. All come to the meeting. Well, 30 or 40 came to the meeting every week, and so did I because I got to go to represent the interests of SNCC and the MFDP.

About the only person who would say hello, greet me, and smile was the Episcopal bishop of Washington, D.C. Tall guy. Very dignified, WASPy guy who looked like a central casting version of what a bishop should look like. Who was that? Bishop Moore. Bishop Moore. He was always very decent, too. And after a while, Bob Spike, who had felt kind of betrayed because of his investment in the Summer Project. He started. He asked to have a meeting, Bob did. And people in the office were saying, you know, it's an establishment group of people. We shouldn't go talk to them. I said, "No, he invited us to a meeting. We've got to go." And me and Jan Goodman went to the meeting representing MFDP, and we walked in the door, game face on, looking for more abuse. And Bob Spike said, "Glad you came. Thank you very much for coming. I've been doing a considerable lot of thinking about Atlantic City, and I believe I might be wrong. I believe I might have had some impressions which aren't quite accurate." And we talked and then he became an ally again. That was the first breakthrough we made.

Actually, in terms of sequence—no, it's the vote first. No, we have announced that we are going to run this challenge, and that the challengers, the contestants for this seat are Mrs. Hamer, Mrs. Gray, Mrs. Divine. Well, the NAACP, the UAW, are all at the leadership conference. All the activists. The Democratic guys. UAW, NAACP, most of all, and Joe Rauh, who felt ill-used. And by the way I think he was trying to be a very honest broker in Atlantic City. He's gotten bad rap from our side. But they were vindictive. And what they are saying to the leadership conference, and when they make the rounds in Congress because they are lobbyists— And what the Democratic leadership

wanted to hear is that the so-called congressional challenge was totally fraudulent. Our contestants were not contestants in any legitimate election, [03:20:00] to which we agreed, but they couldn't be because they were—by racism. That the vote has no meaning. That the Mississippi delegation is solid, and legitimate. And our vote should be dismissed.

These are very hard arguments to counter. And I said, "There is no way the Congress"—the key point—"is going to seat these three people on the basis of no freedom election." To which we have to argue, "That's absolutely correct and we are not claiming this, we are not asking for the seating of our candidates." "So what are you asking for?" "We are asking for you to vacate the seats, not seat the white Mississippians because of this mountain of evidence that black people, 40 percent of the state, have been disfranchised. So on the day Congress opens we want you not to seat them. We want you to open the challenge. We don't think that the Congress is going to finally conclude that Mrs. Gray, Mrs. Divine, Mrs. Hamer must be seated, but they would conclude in all rationality, all fairness, that the elections are fraudulent because of the disfranchisement of half the population. And that they will call for new elections in Mississippi under federal auspices." That was our strategy.

Well, it's a very complicated thing to sell on the floor of the House of Representatives and stuff like that, especially if you don't get a chance to sell it. Now, if you think about the process I described to you, the only way we were going to get a chance to sell it is if the speaker recognizes a congressman who will get up and challenge the seating of the Mississippians. And the conventional wisdom in the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights is that we wouldn't find a single congressman to do it. That

nobody is going to even deal with us because we are not for real. It's bullshit. Student fantasies. So we can't find a congressman. So it took us a long time to find a congressman. You remember who that was?

EC: William Fitts Ryan?

ET: William Fitts Ryan of New York. He represented the Blue Stocking district out there. It was a very liberal district. He was a convinced Catholic man himself, and he was a maverick. He never voted aligned with House leadership. And remember the guy Allen I told you about whom Feather introduced us to. And the reason I tell you about Allen, he told me incredible stories about Feather in Neshoba County. It was me and Allen going to go talk to Congressman Ryan. I forget who came to us and said, "There's a congressman willing to stand up and challenge it." And we're going, and when the elevator stopped working we had to climb stairs, and we're climbing and climbing toward the top of the House office building and [Allen] look at me, he says, "Goddamn, they have him up here with the pigeons." He obviously don't have no status. I mean, you couldn't even call it an office. This was a crib he had in the ceiling of the office building. I mean, he had absolutely no credit or credibility with the House leadership, just from the geography of his office. So we went to talk to him. And he said he would be happy to introduce this bill, he would be happy to challenge. And as we are leaving, Allen said, "Did you notice anything about him?" I said, "Yeah, he's a very short guy." He said, "You know, the House leader, the Speaker of the House is from South Boston." Congressman—what was his name?

JB: Tip O'Neill.

ET: No, no, before Tip O'Neill. And I had that name on the tip of my tongue, too.

What we learned was that Congressman Ryan was a man of small stature, sir. And for that whole challenge to work, it was essential that the congressman rise to challenge the seat and be recognized. And we knew very well that the Speaker of the House, the Honorable John McCormick of South Boston, and Irish ward politician of the old school, was perfectly capable of not seeing Wilt Chamberlain if he rose from the floor and he didn't want to see him. So we knew he couldn't see Congressman William Fitts Ryan, right?

But you know that old rascal John McCormick was very funny. James Roosevelt, son of FDR was a congressman, and he told us a story one time because we were discussing the problems we were having with John McCormick and he said, "Old John is a fine old fellow." Turns out the Congressman had a speaking engagement in New York, didn't tell anybody, left Washington, went to New York. A vote was coming up and John McCormick needed his vote. He was about to take the stage and somebody handed him the phone and he heard this Irish brogue coming at him [03:25:00] over the phone: [Irish accent] "Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy me boy. What would your poor sainted mother say if she was to know you had abandoned John McCormick in his hour of need. Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy me boy! Curse the day. What would your poor sainted mother say?" Congressman Roosevelt said he caught the next shuttle back to Washington and cast his vote.

So we knew we had to do something. We had to get some congressman to support William Fitts Ryan. All the time, Mitchell and Rauh and everybody: "We don't have a single congressman." I remember the day in the leadership conference, and I was trying to talk up the Challenge, they said, "Do you even have a congressman to challenge?" And

I said, "Yes, we do." And their jaws dropped, and they said, "Who? Who? Who?" I said, "William Fitts Ryan." They said, "Ho, ho, ho, ho, ho." And they laughed.

So what we decided to do, we didn't know how to even get the challenge recognized, right? And the administration was saying, and the Mississippi delegation was saying it was a totally farcical challenge without merit, it couldn't be recognized, it wouldn't go anywhere. And the public in Mississippi was believing that. But remember that Lyndon Johnson now had very broad coattails and he had brought in 46 freshmen congressmen in the landslide against Goldwater and his A-bomb monger himself. Or at least that very cynical advertisement with the mushroom cloud. So, there was 47 or so freshmen congressmen who were indebted to Lyndon Johnson. But the thing is, they had to be oriented because they don't know how Washington works. So we got a program for the orientation of these freshmen Democrats and we saw that they were having an orientation meeting at four o'clock one evening in some hotel downtown, I forget which hotel it was.

So we scraped together the money and rented a little room next door for six o'clock that evening. And myself and Jan and some other volunteers stood outside the door as these freshmen were going in and handed them this very well-developed little invitation: "You're invited by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to attend an orientation meeting next door at six o'clock." Of the 47 of them, about 15 came. I remember who they were. One was John Conyers from Michigan. One was Patsy Mink, Democrat of Hawaii. And the other one, whose name I don't remember, was the best of them all. A tall, saturnine fellow in a black suit, who as it turned out was in fact a local undertaker from upstate New York. So these guys came in and we thanked them for

coming and said we would like you to hear why we invited you here. And we told them our version of the Challenge. They knew about Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney. And we were asking them simply to rise with Congressman Ryan when Congress convened.

And there was this long silence. Then the tall, saturnine, very pale WASPy guy from upstate New York said, "Aw, shucks," he said, "the seat I am in has been occupied by a Republican for the past 80 years. I am the first Democrat who ever got elected to that seat in 80 years," or maybe it was 50 years, "and I figure I got two years to be in Washington before I be unelected again. So I might as well do something good while I'm here. You got me." I said, "Thank you cap'n." And then Patsy Mink says, "I don't see how I could do otherwise." I says, "Thank you, Congresswoman Mink." John Conyers came to me as said, "You know I just came back"—and he was brought to that meeting by the same red-haired lady who was a lobbyist for the UAW, who was introducing him around the place—he said, "Listen," and he was really distressed, he said, "I just came"—a very handsome young guy, he was, too—"I just came back from a meeting with the Speaker, and he assures me he is going to put me on the Judiciary Committee," and the Judiciary Committee never had a black person on it, and it's the most important committee in Congress. He says, "so I don't know if I can really support you." And I says, "Let me tell you something. That's between you and your conscience, but to tell you the truth, to have a black person on the Judiciary Committee is very important so if you can't support us, I'll understand." And he was very grateful to hear me say that.

Twenty years later when I went back to Washington, thirty years later. When I went back to [03:30:00] Washington working on the Apartheid issue, I went to his office because he was then head of the Black Caucus, and I said, "Mr. Conyers, I am Mike—."

He said, "I know who you are! You are Mike Thelwell." And he remembered when he first came to Washington, 30 years earlier.

And so we got Mink, we got the tall undertaker. And we got three or four more. So I went back to the leadership conference and I said, "Well, we have five congressmen who agree they will rise with Congressman Ryan." So Mitchell and Rauh go "Well, who are they?" I said, "You know, I just don't have a list with me today. I don't have that information" I wasn't going to make the same mistake we made in Atlantic City.

And then, some supporters sent us a letter and I cannot remember who the congressman was. Because in all our lobbying, we only went to liberals and as far as we were concerned the only liberals we knew were Democrats. So we assumed we had the votes of the five black Democrats—Congressman Nix, Congressman Dawson, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell of New York, and the guy from South Central Los Angeles and one other. We figured we had those five black votes. Even if some of them was very uncertain that they wanted to do it because the leadership was saying no.

But somebody sent us a letter from a Republican congressman from Missouri. You could find out who it was. And he wrote them back saying the shit that the leadership conference leadership was saying: "There is no issue here, there is no contestants to get, there is no real claimant to the seat, they were not in any legitimate election, there is no way the House can seat them, so please forget it." And our supporter, his constituent who got his letter, sent it to us, very distressed. I said to them, "Look, you are right, write them a letter." So I wrote them a long letter, saying, "I did not expect Hamer and Gray and Divine to be seated, but—historic injustice to the black voter in the state of Mississippi—and had forgotten the role of the Republican Party after

Reconstruction." But as I was telling them, I had asked somebody, I had asked Bill Hicks, who was from your state, who was a lobbyist working there, a lawyer, went out to Mississippi I guess because he was gay and he was working in Congress and he used to work with us. And he said, "Oh, this Congressman Curtis. This Congressman Curtis of Missouri"—why isn't it in my head here?—"he's a very, very important Republican, he's a very powerful Republican."

So I wrote him this long letter explaining that we had a legitimate challenge, that we really wanted to challenge the seating of these congresspeople, and that we didn't expect to be seated but we hoped that the seats would be declared vacant and that a new election under federal auspices, a fair election, would take place. And I got a cordial but noncommittal letter from Curtis saying, "We thank you for the explanation. It clarifies a great deal. We will take it under consideration." Something like that, right?

We had another meeting, an earlier meeting with supporters around the country to generate support in Congress for the vote. And there were two guys in the meeting who had to be FBI agents, except I thought the FBI would do better than that. They were wearing work boots and they were wearing really ill-fitting suits. And at such a meeting there are all kinds of progressives, counterculture, or there are intellectuals, college professors. They look tweedy. These are some working class-looking guys who look very uncomfortable. [Laughter] And the discussion went on with all the flowing rhetoric and the hypotheses and all the academic kind of bullshit, and these guys are looking more and more uncomfortable.

And they come up to me and they said, "We are from the union of electricians." And what was the name of that guy who everybody claimed was a Communist? That was

their leader? I forget his name. "So-and-so sent us." He said, "You done a good job, kid, in your discussion. What's happening?" I said, "Well the leadership won't give us any space." "That's right. Those things. That's the way they are." Anyway, Maslow his name was. Will Maslow or something like that.

EC: Arthur? No.

ET: I forget. Anyway, he said, "Will said to give you this." [03:35:00] And he handed me a check for $1,000 in an envelope. And he said, "Now, tell me something. Congressman so-and-so of Pennsylvania. What's he doing?" I said, "I've been calling his office every day. He won't talk to me." They said, "Don't worry about it, kid. You've got him." And they left. So no rhetoric, no theorizing, no nothing. Gave me the $1,000, marched out of there. When I got to my office that Monday, because the meeting was over a weekend, I got to the office, Joanne Gavins says to me, "Mike, Congressman Green" or whatever the hell his name was "from Pennsylvania has been calling. He called four times this morning already. He really wants to talk with you."

EC: [Laughs]

ET: I said, "One class-conscious worker is worth a thousand students." So they delivered that vote.

Alright, so it come time now for the vote to take place in Congress. And as far as we know we have about eight or nine people supposed to rise with Congressman Ryan. So we figure if John McCormick is having a very near-sighted day, he can't fail to see nine people rising up, right? And I don't know that Curtis has done anything. But then there was another inspiration we had. Guyot and the FDP had sent a lot of people to Washington to lobby Congress. Ordinary, simple, poor black folk. They didn't know

much about lobbying Congress but their presence is a statement, and the House office buildings are connected to the hall of Congress by long tunnels, underground tunnels, that have a platform on the side of them. And somebody—I wish I could take credit—because we didn't know what to do with the people. We couldn't get them all—there was a couple, maybe a couple hundred. People had really collected money to come lobby, you know, they were really into it. And there was one group that raising funds, I forget which town it was, and they raised funds to get a bus to bring their people. And then they sat again and they reflected and said, well if people got to ride a bus to come up there, they really can't speak to the Congress as powerfully and as intelligently as they wanted to. They should really go on a plane. So they went out to go raise more funds to send their representatives on a plane so they could speak properly.

So all these people were there. I had no idea what to do with them. And then we said, "Why don't we line them up on the platforms in the tunnel leading from the House office building to the floor of the Congress?" That's what we did and I was in there with them that morning. And there was this line of black folks from Mississippi, all in their Sunday dress, which was already pretty threadbare. And we told them not to say anything. They could wave, or they could nod, but please don't say nothing. Just stand there. We want these people to see you because we don't want you to be an abstract statistic. We want you to be real people so they'll know who they're voting against. And I stood there, and I saw these congressmen coming down there with their little teams, their aides and stuff. And when they'd turn the corner, they'd look up and there was this line of silent black people, lining the tunnel. They'd stop and kind of start back. Some of them would kind of smile and would kind of wave, and the people were just standing there

looking at them. And they got very self-conscious. So I believe that might have affected the vote. It had to have affected some of them, you know? Because it was a very powerful moment.

And then I ran up to the gallery, and the reason why they were standing in the tunnel is we couldn't get seats in the gallery for them. We wanted them to feel like they were participating in some way. And I ran up to the gallery and, first of all, McCormick's got to recognize Ryan and ask the Mississippians to step aside. Then he swears in the House, and then they take a vote whether the Mississippians should stay aside or not. And that vote is very important because it's a voice vote, and McCormick's ears are good enough so he'll hear what he wants to hear. "The ayes have it!" Fuck it. And it's over.

So we need to have a roll call vote, but for a roll call vote you need something like 60 voters, 60 congressmen got to claim a role call vote, right? So we didn't think we'd get a roll call vote. We thought a victory would be getting them to stand aside. And time came, and McCormick said, [03:40:00] "Will the House rise to be sworn." And little Congressman Ryan jumped to his feet, and when I looked behind him a wall of congressmen was standing up, like 60 guys stood up. I said, "Oh my God!" I almost fainted. I mean, I saw Patsy Mink rising up. I even saw John Conyers rising up. Everybody. I mean, 60 people stood up. There's no way John McCormick couldn't have seen that, right? Says to Congressman Ryan, "It's the proudest day in Congress. And why does the Congressman rise?" "I rise to challenge the seating of the congressmen from the second district, the third district, and the fifth district of Mississippi." And the Mississippians had to stand aside. That was the first shock they got. The first shock was when I saw so many of their colleagues rose up. Then McCormick went to do a voice

vote and Ryan chimes up, he says, "I call for a roll call vote." "And who supports Ryan's call?" And this wave of guys stood up again, so they had to have a roll call vote.

And once they had a roll call vote, given the climate in the country, 147 of the Congress, of the House of Representatives, voted to unseat the Mississippians, to vacate the seats at least for the time being. And 290—is that the right figure?—I think it's 290 or something like that, voted against us. But 75 votes had changed. If the 75 of them had come over to us, that would have been a total of 150, wouldn't it? Because we would get them and they would lose them. So we would have won, right? We would have won handily. Seventy-five votes is all it would have taken. And that was amazing enough. And we can get that record, we can go and look at the Congressional Record from January 1965, of how that vote went.

Now, remember, we are starting from where, Mitchell and them saying we are not going to get a single congressman to rise to challenge, and we're not going to get a single vote, and we got 147 votes. Without the assistance of the NAACP, the UAW, or the rest of the liberal hierarchy. So we did that on our own. If they had been supporting us, we might have kicked them out. I mean, I am so exhilarated. This was a result beyond anything we had expected.

I am walking out of the gallery, and I see Joe Rauh and Clarence Mitchell just coming. Now, I don't know why they weren't in the gallery to watch the opening of Congress. Maybe they thought it was just a formality, not that important. No, but they're rustling, coming, and they got pencil and paper in their hands and I'm coming out of the door. They said, "Mike, what was the vote?" I said, "147 to 196." And they write it down. And they dropped 100. Joe Rauh quickly does the math and looks up at Clarence

Mitchell and says, "Shit! This doesn't add up. Let's go ask somebody intelligent." And they storm off. And I was very quite happy to take that insult because I could see how agitated they were, because we had done this all on our own without their support or patronage or whatever it is, you know?

And I'm forgetting the name of the ex-governor of Mississippi. Coleman. Somebody Coleman.

EC: J.C.

ET: J.C. Coleman, right. He looked like another product of central casting, with his long white hair. And he is supposed to be a gentlemanly segregationist. And he was defending the congresspeople. Now he had completely ignored Kuntsler and Kinoy. And pretended they didn't exist because they had no political power. After that vote, he sought them out and accepted from them a subpoena to come and testify, to come and be subpoenaed, come and be deposed, to give a deposition. And the media in the state of Mississippi talked about a day of infamy and a day of disgrace, how 147 of their colleagues had turned their back on the state of Mississippi and voted against the sovereign state of Mississippi, and it was a day of disgrace that will live forever. But the governor sent out instructions to every voting registrar, to every elected official, every local official, to accept our subpoenas to testify. In other words, that gave, [03:45:00] even though they voted to seat them, that vote to have them stand down gave momentum to the Challenge.

And then the lawyers' guild and a few other lawyers' organizations came forward and volunteered. So hundreds of lawyers flocked to the state to start deposing these local officials. And, you know, these white registrars, these white sheriffs, these white local

officials who treated black people like they didn't mean anything, they had no importance, they suddenly had to come and testify. And they started to send them invitations that they should come to the State House, they should come to the courthouse and testify. And we said, "No, no don't do that. Let them come to black churches. Let them come into our community." So these white folks had to come across the tracks into black churches, into the black community to be deposed. And MFDP members packed those meetings and local people would ask them questions: "Isn't it true that so-and-so, so-and-so?" And the lawyers from the South came in and it was a great psychological victory for the people of Mississippi. So that's the story of the vote.

[To JB] Hit it. Save some space.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

JB: We're going.

ET: Alright. When Congress reconvened after that vote, then the whole question of the legislative agenda comes into play. And we're trying to get the vote. The Civil Rights Act had been passed, but for obvious reasons there was no voting provision in there, because the whole lily-white South was predicated on that. They didn't think they could get it passed. So that's what we wanted. I kept saying that. We kept saying that at the leadership conference. Dr. King kept saying that, the Reverend Fauntleroy. "Voting Rights Act." CORE kept saying it. So finally the administration sent Senator [William] Proxmire, I think it was from Wisconsin, little sandy-haired fellow. And he came into say that the administration has been discussing voting rights, and they had the language and the general outlines of a Voting Rights Act, which they wanted to share with us. This I now understand to be a "trial balloon." You send it up to see if it would fly.

He pulled out an envelope on which was scrawled information. That's how formal it was. On the back of this envelope, he read to us that the president and the Congress were prepared to pass a voting rights bill in which every county or political entity in which less than ten percent of black people were registered to vote, less than ten percent, the president *could* send voting registrars to register all citizens. And that was the best legislation they could come up with at the time. And this was the extent that the administration was willing to go, and that was the extent of the legislation that the political climate in the Congress would support.

And when these people come to the leadership conference, there is a whole set of protocols and rhetoric that they go through. One of them, by obligation, is to call Clarence Mitchell, the 101st senator. The 101st senator. They call the bartender that. They call everybody that. That's supposed to be the greatest compliment the Senate can pay. So Proxmire comes and says, "I am so glad to be here at the leadership conference with my old friend, my great old friend, Clarence Mitchell, the 101st senator." And all this grinning going on. And Dr. King was in town that day. Dr. King was in town, but he was to come to a different meeting. Fauntleroy had brought him and he had left. And I don't recall if King was in there when Proxmire gave this language, this project, for the Voting Rights Act. And Clarence Mitchell walked Dr. King out, and came back and said, "Oh, Dr. King says that our proposal is perfectly acceptable, and it seems acceptable to me." And I raised my hand, I said, "Hold on a minute. Is this really acceptable?" He said, "Alright, that ends all discussion. Meeting is adjourned." And then he turns to me and—I said, "I represent people here and there's something I want to say." And as he walked out of the door he said over his shoulder, "Send a memorandum." Big mistake.

So I went out and I wrote this memorandum. And I said, look, Proxmire of Wisconsin came and told us that the Voting Rights Act being contemplated said that wherever less than ten percent of black people are registered to vote, [03:50:00] the president could send voting rights registrars. There are two things wrong with that. If it has to be less than ten percent, that means you have to have ninety-one percent discrimination. Does that mean in the face of the federal government, 90 percent discrimination, disfranchisement is alright? I said it's only in those states, those principalities, where by great sacrifice, of life, of jobs, of personal safety, our people managed to get more than ten percent of themselves, ten percent or more registered. Then that means they're not going to get any support from the federal government? Then the fact is, the legislation as presented has no teeth. The president *could* send registrars? That means he doesn't have to. It's not automatic. That means that what you have given him is a stick to beat southern recalcitrant congressmen over the head and say, "If you mess with me I am going to send voting registrars to your district."

That is not acceptable. That is not acceptable to me, and also it's not acceptable to our constituents that we represent. If this is in fact honest and this is the best political solution that the climate of opinion in the Congress can come up with, it is up to us, the activist elements of the Civil Rights Movement, to go into the streets of this nation to create a climate of opinion where we can get decent voting rights legislation. And that's how it ended. Well, when I called around, of course Jim Forman would sign it for SNCC. Of course, whoever the guy that had replaced Jim Farmer, would sign it for CORE.

EC: McKissick.

ET: [Floyd] McKissick. And Andy Young called me up. In fact, he called me up

when I was up here at the University of Massachusetts explaining why I couldn't come, to say that Martin Luther King would sign it. So that meant SNCC, CORE, Martin Luther King, and Lawrence Guyot would sign for the MFDP. The one mistake I made was to send it out on MFDP letterhead, and I hadn't thought about it, because that's the letterhead I used. But all those signatures were there, and it was a memorandum addressed to the leadership conference, because Clarence Mitchell had said to send a memorandum. The only feedback I got from the signatories was Jim, whatever his name was, from CORE.

EC: McKissick.

ET: No, not McKissick.

EC: McCain?

ET: No. I forget his name. He called up, he said—

EC: Oh, CORE. Farmer?

ET: Not Farmer. This is the guy who really handled matters, a white boy.

EC: It wasn't McCain? Jim McCain?

ET: No. Well, he called up and said, "You betrayed us." I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, I thought his memorandum would go out on a blank, no letterhead at all coming from all people equally. It was sent out on the MFDP letterhead." I said, "Oh my God. I really didn't think about it. I've done terribly. I see what you're saying now." I hadn't thought about it. It was the letterhead we had always used. But nobody else had any objection.

Except at the leadership conference, we were meeting every week because the legislative agendas coming into play. We didn't meet. And then the next week, we didn't

meet again. So for two weeks, the leadership conference didn't meet. Then somebody told me that Clarence Mitchell had a heart attack, a mild heart attack. Said that I'd called him "a traitor, and a sellout." I never called him nothing. "That he was selling out black people," and he was in Puerto Rico recuperating. But they didn't meet, so obviously that memorandum, with Dr. King's signature, particularly, on it, and going out to all these church groups who were members there. And because the logic was— That's the memorandum I wanted you to get for me. The logic was irreproachable. Fuck you mean, "Less than ten percent. Ninety-one percent disfranchisement is acceptable?" It completely was about showing us being toadies of the administration, so they'd never meet.

What made it worse was, remember what the last paragraph said. What the last paragraph said?

EC: That the president can—

ET: No, my memorandum.

EC: Oh, that you'd get people in the streets to have demonstrations.

ET: Let us create—if this is in fact the truth, that if the political climate in Washington can't tolerate—let us create a political climate in the country that will give us real voting rights. And you can find out the date of that memorandum, because in the two or three weeks that they didn't meet—

EC: Selma.

ET: Selma happened. [Laughter] And it's sheer coincidence!

EC: Kind of like when you came into the country and the sit-ins happened?

ET: Sheer coincidence. [03:55:00] I mean, we couldn't have planned it. We

couldn't have planned Jim Clark and his fucking posse beating up people on the Elmer [Edmund] Pettus bridge. But the two things happened one after the other.

And during the time when the leadership conference didn't meet, they are obviously in great disarray. And the leadership of Joe Rauh and Clarence Mitchell were completely scattered because Walter Reuther sent out a telegram to all members of the leadership conference. I remember Bob Spike called me up, he said, "Jesus Christ. Did you ever see a thing so vulgar?" In the first paragraph it mentions a million dollars. In the first paragraph, Walter Reuther said the UAW was willing to set up a fund of a million dollars to endow the survivors of martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement. And in the second paragraph he said he was calling a meeting. And he said, all members of the leadership conference to a meeting to discuss policies and movement forward. He was obviously trying to move into a vacuum to take over because obviously Joe Rauh and Mitchell were discredited. The NAACP leadership.

At that meeting, I remember Courtland Cox came, and Clarence Mitchell was saying, "Well, the real president of the leadership conference is Roy Wilkins. I am just serving in his place as the Washington representative," and Courtland looking at him says, "Roy Wilkins is the chairman of the leadership conference? Where is that engraved in stone." He said, "Well, it's not written anywhere." He said, "So it's folklore!"

EC: [Laughter]

ET: Clarence Mitchell almost fainted.

EC: Another heart attack?

ET: Like I was challenging the leadership, right? Well, anyway, Walter Reuther calls this meeting. And guess who he brings to speak for him? Bayard, of course. I mean,

we knew Bayard well and respected him. So Bayard came and said, "Here's what we're going to do. We are going to endow this million dollar thing to take care of the families of the martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement and we are going to set up an organization to conduct the business of civil rights." I just raised my hand and said, "Ok, with this endowment for the martyrs, will the widow of Malcolm X and his daughters be recipients? Will they be beneficiaries?" A long silence. Bayard's jaw dropped, he obviously hadn't thought of it. Walter Reuther sitting next to him looked very strange. And I asked a second question about who would send out a press release describing new this new organization and how did the—

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

EC: That's right, they couldn't answer that one and they couldn't answer—

JB: Ok, it's rolling again.

EC: So we should say that this is a continuation of the second drive.

JB: The numbers will come up that way, so. Okay, it seems to be rolling.

ET: Is it taping now? Yeah. And the second question is, who would be present when this statement—because the whole national, international media were gathered outside. What kind of statement are we going to make to the assembled press and what will we tell them, and they couldn't answer that question so the meeting broke up in confusion. Went back to the office and the phone rings and it's Walter Reuther. And he wanted to know whether I would have dinner with him. I said, "Well, you know, Mr. Reuther, on two conditions. Number one it has to be in The Keys restaurant," a black restaurant. Long silence. "And on the other hand, the rest of my staff will have to come. My office staff. There's four of us. Is that okay?" He said, "Alright." And when I hung

up the phone, Jan, who was much more politically sophisticated, said, "You idiot! He was fixing to offer you a job. Why do you think he wanted to have dinner with you?" I said, "I didn't want the job with him, anyway." So the whole staff went out, and had dinner. A very stiff, pointless dinner. It wasn't very much fun with Walter Reuther and the red haired lady at The Keys restaurant.

And the Voting Rights Act, after Selma, was rewritten to have a very real, positive effect on the political history of the country and the South. And I consider that memorandum, which I would love to see, had a great deal to contribute to that because they were ready to say that that was acceptable, more than ten percent disfranchisement and stuff like that.

EC: I'll look for it.

ET: So I consider it a slight contribution to history. [04:00:00]

Alright. Now, remember I told you with the book, the Carmichael book, it was way, way too long, and how the editor, who was a very good editor, was taking out everything which did not seem to drive the central narrative. Well, one of the parts in there was a little section dedicated to Jesse Harris, and it told a story of a young Mississippi black man, when the Freedom Riders had finally come free from Alabama, was heading toward Mississippi, he learned that they were coming and he went to the bus station to meet them.

There had been planned another reception of black people there. And that was when the crackers who ran the state went into Parchman Farm, got some of the—as they were described [as the] hardest black criminals—guys who were there for manslaughter or murder, and said to them: "We know you always wanted to kick some white ass. Well,

you got your chance now. We are going to take you to the bus station. When them Freedom Riders come, we want you to fuck them up completely. And you will get liquor, you will get women, and you will get easier time when you come back." And so about ten or twelve black criminals that they had that way. And they thought about it for a minute, shuffled their feet, and said, "Cap'n, I don't believe I will." And none of them would agree to come to the bus station to beat up the Freedom Riders, which I think is one of the single most heroic—because when you are a black prisoner in Parchman those days, your life has no guarantees. None of them would do it.

But there was one black Mississippian who met the Freedom Riders, a young 17 year-old kid named Jesse Harris. And he walked into the white waiting room with the black Freedom Riders as the white ones walked into the black waiting room. And he got arrested. Well, he wasn't a Freedom Rider. His name wasn't on any list. Nobody knew him. He was a local kid. So they sent him to the country jail and they sent the Freedom Riders some place else. The Freedom Riders had some modest protection, because after all the violence in Alabama and stuff, the deal Robert Kennedy cut was they wouldn't be brutalized and they would be treated in a certain way. And the Justice Department was paying attention. But nobody was paying attention to Jesse Harris, the local kid who was sent off by himself to the country farm. And one day, one of the walking bosses told him to do something, and Jesse said, "Yes." And the walking boss said, "Yes what? You mean yes, sir, don't you?" And Jesse said, "I only says sir to my daddy or to people I respect." So the walking boss said, "Ok, boy, lie down over there." And he sent for Brown Bessie, which was a big strap, and he tore up poor Jesse's ass. Tore it up. Beat him up, sorry. Gave him a whipping. And Jesse stood up after that. His legs were

trembling, he was weak from shock. And the cracker said, "I guess you know how to say sir now, don't you, boy?" And Jesse just looked at him and turned around and lay back down on the long. And said, "I ain't saying sir. You can beat me some more." And the guy didn't have the conscience to continue beating Jesse. [To JB]: Hit it, hit it, hit it.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

Jesse of course joined SNCC. He became project director in Macomb. He ran the security for Martin Luther King when he came to Mississippi. He was a legitimate hero to us people in SNCC. And after the movement imploded he became a Muslim minister, then that broke up and he got involved with drugs. I think he became an addict, he served some time in jail. And then he disappeared. Charlie Cobb went down looking for him, and couldn't find him anywhere. He had disappeared. And Charlie reminded me that Jesse had told him that as a youth, he used to caddy at the country club in Jackson. And he used to hustle those crackers for money. And I said, "Is that possible?" Charlie said, "That's what I asked him. I said, 'Jesse, you really used to hustle those crackers for money?' And Jesse said, 'Yes, Charlie, it could be done but you had to play a very careful game.'" [Laughter] So I included that in a book as a tribute to the disappeared Jesse, whom we all thought was dead. And that's one of the things the editor wanted to cut because it didn't drive the narrative, and I said, "No, no, it's an epitaph for Jesse. He might have disappeared [04:05:00] but he has to leave some record in the world."

And so she kept it. And the book came out, and I went to Jackson for a launch and a reading. And when I got there, the room was buzzing. People said, "Guess who's back. Guess who's back. Guess who came back. Jesse Harris. Jesse Harris came back." I said, "Oh, my God." And when I went to talk to Jesse right quick, he said where he'd been, he

said he'd even been to Jamaica, working on a construction crew. But all he went was to the work site and to the bar. And he said, "I'd sit in the bar and people would talk about the Civil Rights Movement. I never opened my mouth. Who's going to believe an old Negro like me?" I said, "Jesse, read this." And I showed him the passage in the book that told the story, and I just watched him as he read it very slowly, very carefully. And a little smile crossed his face. When he was finished, I said, "Jesse, what do you think?" He said, "Dammit, Mike. I sure was bad, wasn't I" I said, "Yes you were, Jesse." And the next time you go to a bar, I want you to talk about knowing Martin Luther King and being involved the movement, you take this book with you. And if anybody challenges your veracity, you just show them that passage.

[To JB] Did I get it in?

JB: Yep.

EC: How did you end up here at the University of Massachusetts?

ET: Sheer accident and by the good offices of the FBI. I am a foreign student, always have been. And I was here on a foreign student's visa. When I was sitting in my office at the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in Washington, D.C., and in walks these two suits looking discomfited to be there. And it turns out they were men from the FBI. And they said to me, "Mr. Thelwell, you are the director of this office?" I said, "Yes, sir." They said, "Are you or are you not a foreign student?" I said, "Yes, sir. I am." They said, "You made a pledge when you came here not to involve yourself in the internal affairs of the country, did you not?" said, "Yes, sir." They said, "How would you describe what you are doing now?" I said, "Well, I am trying to unseat three unfairly elected people who disfranchised black people in Mississippi. I am trying to deepen the

current, sir, of American democracy." They said, "Be that as it may, Mr. Thelwell, if you're not in school by September"—and this was about June or July—"we shall personally come and escort you to the plane and deport you from the country."

I think they were in a bad mood when they left, but still a much better conducting of their affairs than they would do now. Now, I know they'd kick my ass out immediately, you know? So in some ways the country has not really improved. And they also I think were a little bit pissed because Len Holt, the SNCC doctor, the lawyer, came busting in, I think to defend me. And said, "Who are these gentlemen, Mike?" I said, "Len, they're from the FBI." He said, "Oh, the FBI, and how is our favorite girlfriend this morning?" They said, "Your favorite girlfriend?" He said, "Yes. J. Edgar Hoover." So that didn't put a nice spin on affairs. So they left.

So I had a meeting. I said, you know, "They say they're going to deport me unless I am back in school." I said, "Oh my God, I got a letter from Sid Kaplan at the University of Massachusetts offering me a fellowship, but I threw it away." And Joanne Gavin, the office manager, said, "Yeah, but I pulled it out of the wastebasket." So there was a letter from Kaplan. And the short of it is that's how I ended up here. But the longer story is also quite interesting, because all my time in the movement, I had never had a conversation with Martin Luther King.

Well, I think it was about that same memorandum on the Voting Rights Act. I had to run up here to explain to them, in the middle of the summer, that I couldn't be here when school started in September because I had to see the Challenge out. And I didn't know if the Congress would vote on the Challenge by early September, so I could be here when school opened. So I said I would have to miss a week, maybe two, but I would be

happy to start. The chairman of the department and the head of freshman English where I was supposed to be teaching said, "Well, you know, Mr. Thelwell, you have never been in graduate school before. It's a little more rigorous." I am sure they was thinking I was coming from a black school. I don't know nothing. I said, "Yes, sir. But I am sure I will be able to pick up the work."

"Well, we don't really know." And they were about to say that either I be here on time [04:10:00] or not come at all. "We don't know if you can have two weeks," when the secretary runs in and says, "Is this Mr. Thelwell?" I said, "Yes." "You have a phone call." And the chairman of the department and the head of freshman English looked very disapproving. "Imagine this student having a phone call while in conference with us." I said, "No, ma'am, I can't take the phone call. I am really very busy here." She says, "No, I think you will want to take this phone call." So their eyebrows go up even more. And I said, "And why is that, ma'am?" She said, "Because it is from Dr. Martin Luther King." And the whole atmosphere changed and I said, "Yes, I could go have the phone call." And if I'd been smart enough I'd have got my office to go and pretend that. But it really wasn't even from Dr. King. It was from Andy Young, calling for Dr. King, to clarify something about that memorandum we had earlier discussed. At which point, the chairman of the department, who was a southern gentleman, by the way, a white southern gentleman, and the director of freshman English said, "Yes I could have a couple weeks if it were necessary." But then the director of freshman English told me what I shouldn't talk about in class when I was teaching freshman English. "The only subjects you should avoid is politics, religion, and sex. Those are not acceptable." And I said, "Well, perhaps you would be good enough to tell me what *is* acceptable?"

So I went back to D.C., and they had sent me my class list. I was supposed to teach, because the fellowship was gone so they gave me an assistantship. And I have two class lists that were well-balanced, there were lots of Mary Jane's and Susan and stuff like this. Well, they sent me back a class list saying, well, "We have decided in view of your inexperience you should only teach one course." And when I looked at the list, it was the freshman football team. Nothing but men. Well I think that was clearly a coincidence.

JB: We're getting down to two percent.

ET: That's it.

JB: So let's—

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

JB: We're on.

ET: Okay. Bayard came down speaking for the UAW. And then after that the leadership conference met again for the first time after a long hiatus. And I walked into the room and there is Clarence Mitchell puffing and huffing, and he's saying, "Yes, I was called a traitor and a sellout." And Evans and Novak and those other columnists had run stories about how the students were trying to wreck the Civil Rights Movement, and they had forged Dr. King's signature on a memorandum, which was calculated to destroy the harmony of the Civil Rights Movement. I never done any such thing! Andy Young called me up at UMass. And he said, "Yes, sir, we are going to talk about the misuse of Dr. King's name, and the forging of his name. And Bayard Rustin is here with a statement from Dr. King." And I said, "Oh, fuck. If Dr. King the Nobel Prize winner says that Mike Thelwell, a SNCC student, forged his name on the memorandum, who the fuck is going

to believe me?" And the memorandum, by the way, didn't have this radical and disruptive language. It was very logical. That's why I want you to get it for me, please.

And Bayard got up. I'm sitting there with my heart in my mouth, saying, "My professional reputation is done, my character will be traduced, I hope Martin Luther King knows that I didn't forge my name because I didn't." And Bayard got up and [read] a statement that said absolutely nothing. And then he stopped. "Dr. King said he believes in this time civility's necessary and harsh language shouldn't be used, and blah blah blah blah." And then he stopped. And Clarence Mitchell said, "Is that all? Is that all?" Bayard said, "Yes, that is all." And Mitchell looked very disappointed because he never talked about forging King's name. So I was very, very grateful to Dr. King. But then how could he lie, being Dr. King? But I noticed that Bayard scratched out a last paragraph. And so afterwards I ran to him and said, "Thank you, Bayard. Can I have that document, please?" He said, "Sure, you can have it." But the last three lines of that statement had been scratched out so thoroughly that there were holes in the paper. You couldn't read what it said. But it never said I forged Dr. King's name, which I didn't do. And that was very principled of Dr. King and Bayard, because clearly they were under pressure because all these columnists were saying what a disruptive document it was, that Dr. King couldn't possibly have signed such a disruptive and [04:15:00] radical document, and that his name had to be forged, but he didn't say it.

[Recording ends at 04:15:05]

END OF INTERVIEW