

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewees: Donzaleigh Avis Abernathy, Dr. Ralph David Abernathy, III, and Juandalynn Ralphita Abernathy via video teleconference

Interview Date: October 10, 2013

Location: Campus of Georgia Tech University, Atlanta, Georgia, and U.S. Army Garrison Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany

Interviewer: Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: 02:02:33

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Good morning.

Juandalynn Abernathy: Good morning.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Today is Thursday, October 10th, 2013. My name is Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries of the Ohio State University and the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am with videographer John Bishop, here in Atlanta, Georgia, on the campus of Georgia Tech University to conduct an interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress. We are here today with Donzaleigh Avis Abernathy and Ralph David Abernathy, III. And joining us via videolink from the United States Army Garrison Stuttgart in Stuttgart, Germany, is Juandalynn Ralphita Abernathy.

Thank you all so much for being here today and for participating in this historic oral history project.

Ralph David Abernathy: Thank you for having us.

Donzaleigh Abernathy: Thank you.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: Absolutely. You know, I want to begin—

Juandalynn Abernathy: Thank you, thank you.

HJ: Thank you. I would like to begin, Juandalynn, with you.

JA: Yes.

HJ: You are the oldest of the children of Ralph David Abernathy, Junior.

RA: Senior.

HJ: Senior—and Juanita Abernathy.

JA: That's right.

HJ: If you could say just briefly, just a word, what are your earliest memories of the Civil Rights Movement?

JA: I can remember very clearly one day, one afternoon, police officers coming to the house and taking our new car. They were very mean. They looked very mean. I guess they must have been policemen or state patrol. I don't know who they were, because I was very small. But they came and took our new car, and I didn't understand that. Let's see, I must have been about, I guess, two, two or three years of age. That was very devastating because I was a child, you know. That was the only form of transportation that we had, and I didn't understand it. I remember the car being there, and I remember them coming.

And I remember very often being afraid as a little child to go out in the backyard

of our house. Donzaleigh was born then. We had a dog. Daddy bought a dog or got a dog, I was told, the day of my birth, and his dog was named Brownie. And Brownie looked like a cocker spaniel, but she had some Spitz in her. And she was, I think, great protection, because she lived many, many years until we actually moved to Atlanta, Georgia. But she was like protection for us, I felt. But because of this taking away of the car and them being not very kind—they were mean, let's put it that way, they were very mean—and being afraid to go into the backyard with Donzaleigh, that was devastating as a child. That was the first. That was the very first memories.

And now, as we started to grow up and get older, we found out that was—the taking of that car was for the payment to the state of Alabama for the Montgomery bus boycott, see, because Daddy came from Alabama. Uncle Martin, Dr. King, did not. He didn't have any properties. And therefore they took his car, Daddy's car, and they sold, actually, a portion of the family property at state auction. The car was auctioned off and his property was auctioned off to pay some financial debt that the Montgomery [0:05:00] bus boycott had incurred, costs for the protest. Yeah, that was the first for me.

HJ: Thank you. Donzaleigh, you were probably too young to remember that particular incident. But what was your earliest memory of the Civil Rights Movement?

DA: Well, when our home was bombed, my mother was pregnant with me. Juandalynn was around. She was in the house with Mother. Mother said that Juandalynn awakened that following morning, because they stayed that night with the front of the house blown away, singing. So, that was the first time Mother had ever heard Juandalynn sing. However, when I came out of my mother's womb, I shook as an infant. I remember shaking as an infant, as a little girl.

I remember we went and stayed with Margaret Brown, who were members of our church. And I remember Aunt Margaret smoked cigarettes and being a little baby and not wanting the cigarettes around me. I remember going to church, and people would want to kiss Juandalynn on the cheek and kiss me on the cheek, and Juandalynn would break out. Her skin was so sensitive, so she'd be beet-red by the time we left church. So, what I would do is I would be in my dad's arms, and people would come to kiss me, and I would spit, [makes spitting noise] like this, all the time, every time people would get close. I remember that.

JA: [Laughs]

DA: [Laughs] I remember these things! I remember the Freedom Riders came and stayed at our home.

JA: Yeah.

DA: Well, before that, I just want to say, I remember when Daddy came home, and I was in a little walker, and he told us that Ralph III had been born, a son. And Juandalynn said, "Oh, he's a boy. Send him back!" [Laughs] And I remember that! She wanted a girl.

And I remember when the Freedom Riders came, because they were people of all different colors. They stayed in our house.

HJ: And you were in Atlanta at the time?

DA: No, we were living in Montgomery.

HJ: Still lived in Montgomery, okay.

DA: We lived in Montgomery still.

JA: Montgomery, Alabama.

HJ: Okay.

DA: And so, they were in my dad's church. You know, when they get to Montgomery, John Lewis and Jim Zwerg, they were besieged, they were seized by these angry racists, beat them unmercifully. And so, anyway, there were some of those Freedom Riders were staying at my parents' house. And I'll never forget they were having a, like, gathering in the living room, and Juandalynn found some scissors, and she said, "Let me cut your braid." And that's what I'll never forget. She cut my hair. It was the first haircut I'd ever had. Do you remember that, Juandalynn?

JA: Yeah, but it didn't happen like you thought it happened.

DA: Anyway, I remember her cutting my hair.

JA: That's incorrect, Donzaleigh! That's incorrect. We were in bed. Mother put us to bed because Mother had cooked that evening for these people. And I was—I guess I was angry because we couldn't stay up. And we slept in bunk beds.

DA: Bunk beds.

JA: Yeah. And so, and then, I said, "Well, let me cut Donzaleigh's hair."

[Laughter] I think I cut her hair.

DA: [Laughing] She cut off my little braids.

JA: I can't remember! But that actually doesn't have anything to do with—
[laughter]

DA: It does! It does, because we had all—

JA: The Movement.

DA: We did, because we had all those black and white people in our living room, and those were the days of the Civil Rights Movement, and I will never forget it.

JA: I remember sometimes them coming in the evening, and it would be at a time when we would actually be in bed.

DA: Yeah.

JA: I remember some photos that I think Donzaleigh has placed in a book, but there are some photos there of Glenn Smiley and Uncle Bob and Aunt Coretta. I remember taking those pictures. I have vague memories of meetings taking place in the evening.

But the car—and I don't remember the bombing of the house. I just remember being very sad and having to go live [0:10:00] in another house of a family of—well, they didn't have children. They were married. It was a married couple, and they invited Mother and Daddy to come to live with them. And we lived practically almost a year, up until the birth of Donzaleigh, almost until the birth of Donzaleigh, we lived in Margaret Brown's house. And that wasn't very comfortable for us. I remember feeling quite alone.

But I was—as a child, as a baby, I was very much alone up until Donzaleigh was born. And it was, now that I reflect back, you know, I felt not understood. I remember seeing and feeling things, but I couldn't understand them as a child. You understand? And when Donzaleigh was born, it was like, “Oh, I've got company! Oh, it's great!” And so, I couldn't really articulate, and Donzaleigh couldn't either, but we could articulate among each other, among ourselves. And then, Ralph was born, and even—

DA: We had baby talk. We had baby talk.

JA: Yeah. [Laughs]

DA: We had a—children can talk, and adults don't understand, but we could communicate and understand, yeah. And I remember being afraid to go in that backyard.

And Mother tells the story of when we were in the backyard, and the police came. And she was like, “Don’t you touch my children!” And they would always call and say hateful stuff. And I remember Mother hanging up the telephone and, you know, putting it down on the wall. I remember when Juandalynn fell on the heater and burned the side of her leg.

JA: Oh, yeah.

DA: And I remember when Uncle Martin and Aunt Coretta moved to Atlanta, and Yoki was Juandalynn’s best friend. And I’ll never forget the train ride that we had from Montgomery to Atlanta. It was segregated, and you couldn’t—Daddy took just me and Juandalynn. And Rosa, our housekeeper, dressed us up real fancy. Daddy said we could ask for *nothing*. We had on—you know, we wore crinolines.

JA: Daddy said that we could—he said he was going to Atlanta, and we asked if we could go. The Kings had already moved.

DA: Yeah, and we loved Yoki.

JA: And he said, “Okay, yeah, you can go if you don’t *ask* for anything.” And later on, they explained to us why, and that was, back in those days, you know, you had separate toilets, you had separate fountains, you had everything separate. And our parents never subjected us, *never* subjected us to that kind of—we never drank out of those fountains, we never used separate toilets. And he said to us specifically, “You can go if you don’t *ask* for anything. You have to sit next to me. Don’t ask for the toilet. Don’t ask for this.” And we took the entire ride from Montgomery, Alabama, to Atlanta—we didn’t go to a toilet, we didn’t drink anything. And that’s how I know you can do everything with discipline. And—

DA: I remember them meeting us. I remember Uncle Martin and them meeting us at the old Atlanta train station. It was glorious. It looked like 30th Street Station in Philadelphia. And I just remember that beautiful old train station. And then, we went and we stayed at their house. And they lived at the house on Johnson Avenue, and it had these big wallpaper white flowers and that huge staircase. It was a Victorian house.

HJ: And, of course, Yoki is Yolanda King.

DA: Yoki is Yolanda, and Yolanda and Juandalynn were best friends, and Yoki is my oldest friend. And Juandalynn and Yoki were in—you all went to—we went to nursery school—you all went to nursery school together. They were always together.

JA: We went to Holt Street.

DA: Holt Street, and you went to Mrs., Mrs.—what's that lady's name?

JA: Hanley.

DA: Mrs. Hanley. They went to Mrs. Hanley's school together. And so, that's when they'd ride together. I'm sorry. We're talking—[laughs]

HJ: Well, that's fine, that's fine. Ralph David, if I may, let me ask you [0:15:00] the same question. You were born in 1959, so younger than your two older sisters, but what was sort of your earliest memory, so some of your early memories of the Civil Rights Movement?

RA: Well, I—my earliest memory was a memory of fear.

JA: That's right.

RA: And when I was growing up, they had the picture of the house that was bombed before I was born.

HJ: Which would have been in January of 1957?

DA: Right.

RA: Yes. And that picture—I was so afraid that they were going to bomb the house again and hit my room, thinking they were hitting Mama and Daddy's. And I was the only one that had to sleep in my room by myself. Donzaleigh and Juandalynn had—

JA: Excuse me. Ralph, let me correct. Ralph, this is my brother, is one hundred percent correct. He never talked about that. That is exactly right. And he, as a boy—excuse me, Ralph, I don't want to take over, but I wanted to clear something up. We always stayed in Montgomery, Alabama, all—

DA: On the front.

JA: Donzaleigh and I slept in one room together, and Ralph was in the baby bed. And when we moved to Atlanta, he was still in the baby bed, but we still all slept in one room. And when we were separated, it was very devastating for him—

DA: Yes.

JA: Because he was alone in his room.

DA: He was afraid.

JA: And the room was on the front. And, as he stated, about the house being bombed, that is—we lived in fear, but Ralph, more importantly, and I feel very sorry, I have to say this on record, because he had a lot to carry. He had a lot to carry. Donzaleigh and I had each other, as two girls, but always sleeping together in one room. And then, the house being bombed, and then, my brother in another room. But, I'm sorry, Ralph, take over. I'm sorry.

RA: That's—

DA: When he slept, though, when we all slept together as two families, Ralph and

Dexter shared the crib, Martin and I shared the bottom bunk, and—

JA: We're talking about Ralph—

DA: One second, Juandalynn!

JA: But Ralph needs to talk.

DA: I know that, Juandalynn. And Juandalynn and Kwame shared—well, Juandalynn and Yoki shared the top bunk, and Ralph and Dexter used to rock. Remember when you would rock and rock the crib?

RA: Um-hmm.

HJ: Dexter King?

DA: Dexter King, yeah.

RA: Yes.

HJ: So, Ralph?

RA: Okay, and—

JA: But Dexter came two years later. We're talking about Ralph, now.

RA: And so, that fear. And so, as a result of that fear, my mother would—I would petition her to leave the light on in the hall and the door open, so that I would have, I guess, a security blanket or a sense of security, for me, when I would go to bed at night. And that light on in the hall, with that door open, with that light piercing through the room, was very soothing for me. And I remembered knocking on my wall, and Donzaleigh and Juandalynn were in their room, and they would knock back on the wall to me, and we would communicate that way. And so, that's one of the things I remember, my earliest memories.

As well, I remember traveling on the back roads of Alabama and Georgia, and we

could not go—we couldn't stop on the way. We couldn't use the restroom. We couldn't get anything to eat. And I remember having to use the restroom really, really bad. And I remember Daddy stopped the car, and I had to use—I urinated on the side of the road, and we got back in the car and kept on going. I remember one time there was this car that followed us from—

JA: That's right!

RA: I don't know, I guess from the Alabama, from where we were to the Alabama state line or what, but there was this car that just followed us the *whole* way that we were going, and it was very fearful. And so, my earliest memories of the Civil Rights Movement were memories of fear and memories of caution and a very perilous time in history, of course, but more importantly a very perilous time in our lives as children. And so, it was engulfed with fear and caution, but also a sense of security, [0:20:00] an unspoken sense of love that I felt from the civil rights workers in the Movement—

JA: Um-hmm, that's right.

RA: And a sense of spirit—it had to be of God, who had just kind of cloaked His presence over us as children.

JA: That's right.

RA: And so, I didn't think that anything would happen to us, as children, because I felt that God's cloak or His presence or His love protecting us or cloaking us, as children. But at the same time, we had that fear of the reality that we lived in every day, but it was an unspoken sense of security that we got, and it had to be from that foundation that our families and our fathers and our mothers were anchored in Christ.

DA: I remember Mother had that picture of those angels with the two children.

RA: The black angels.

DA: The black angels.

RA: With the two black children.

DA: And she put them over the bed so, she said, the angels would watch over us at nighttime. And every night we would get down on our knees and pray, “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” And so, every night, I remember praying, “Please just let us live to the morning, please just let us live to the morning.” And that’s just the way it was. And Ralph is right, we had our little code and we’d communicate. But every night was fearful. Night was fearful, without a doubt. But the morning would come, and everything would be okay.

HJ: Living with that fear, did you as children ever talk amongst yourselves about either the fear or just what was going on with your parents in the Movement? I mean, were there conversations—certainly there were conversations that adults were having that you may not have been privy to, but did you ever talk about these types of things and how you were feeling and what was going on among yourselves as siblings?

DA: Well, Daddy always let us know that, you know, he could be killed. So, we would cry every time we said good-bye to him on Monday morning, because he would be gone during the week. So, that was our fear, that he would be killed. And then, they would call during the week—during, you know, dinnertime—and say hateful stuff on the telephone. So, and they would tell Mother they were going to kill us, kill her, kill her children, kill her husband. So, I mean, I think we spoke, but it was just the way it was.

And then we rode to school, or we went to school with the King kids from nursery

school up to high school. So, I mean, yeah, and we'd all make jokes to each other. You'd make light of it. And Daddy used to say the most important thing to have in life is a sense of humor, because life will have its hardest moments, and humor will be the thing that will get you through. So, yeah, we talked. And I knew he was afraid. He knew I was afraid. Juandalynn was—you were afraid, too, but I don't remember talking about it with you.

RA: I think it was more—

JA: I don't remember anything—

RA: I was going to say I think—

JA: I don't think—

RA: Go ahead, Juandalynn.

JA: No, no. Go on, go on. I'll speak afterwards.

RA: I was just going to say that, as children, you're kind of like Teflon Don, so to speak. Children have a way of always bouncing back. They have a way of always landing on their feet. And so, we knew the presence of that fear. We understood that fear. But it was an—we didn't really talk about the fear. It was par for our course of growing up. It was the way of life for us. And so, it was alright.

JA: That's right, that's right.

RA: Because it was our way of life.

JA: That's perfect.

RA: And so, we didn't talk about it.

JA: We didn't know anything—

RA: We didn't know any better. We didn't know any better. [Laughs] We didn't

know any different lifestyle than the one that we were living. And so, you know, we adapted.

JA: That's right.

RA: And children have a way of adapting. And so, we just adapted.

JA: Exactly. That's correct.

HJ: And Juandalynn, you agree. You agree?

JA: I'm one hundred percent in agreement. I always felt as if I had to be, and I was always told from my parents, both my mother and my father, that I always had to set the example. And how I reacted, then my sister and my brother would react. And so, therefore, I had to be very strong. [0:25:00] I think that we, as Abernathy children, were very strong anyway. We had to be, because all eyes were always on us: how we acted, how we carried ourselves, how we spoke, how we articulated. It was just the way it was, and we didn't even know anything—we didn't know any other way. We didn't have another life. We only had this life.

And therefore, we—I think we were great children and I think that we [mastered] it greatly. Fear—of course, we were afraid. But fear didn't dictate our lives. We were very grounded in our religion. And a better father and a better mother I couldn't have asked for. And we had the church community, more importantly in Montgomery, Alabama, that stood behind us, and we felt love and we felt embraced. I think that took, also, a lot of pressure and a lot of fear and a lot of—

I remember walking to school. I had to go to school earlier than I was supposed to go to school, because my godmother, Mama Dessa, was a first-grade teacher, and she said, "Okay," I could go to first grade, and I wasn't of first grade age. And the children in

the church would pick me up and walk with me there and bring me back to the door. And I could do whatever they said. There was always some kind of protection there. So, you know, that was just life. That was a part of our daily routine, our life.

HJ: You had just mentioned, you know, the children in the church walking you to and from school. I'm curious, maybe Ralph or—how did other children, I mean, treat you all and respond to you all, as the children of Reverend Abernathy?

DA: Well, what I want to say is, the thing was that our constant companions were the King children. So, like Juandalynn, we went to the same schools. We had ballet together on Saturdays, the boys had football, they went to get their haircuts, then we would reconvene as a family. And oftentimes, if our mother drove us to school, then the driver would drive us back home. So, the only consistent children we had in our lives were the King children.

And oftentimes, other people wouldn't allow their children to come to our house to play because they were afraid something might happen, you know. And so, I was different from Juandalynn and Ralph, because Ralph was outgoing and would go outside and play, and Juandalynn, too. And I became very introverted and would go inside into the closet and play in the closet. And my father, I remember him saying to my mother, "Something is wrong with our child. She won't go outside."

But I wanted—as we go on, I want you to know I remember us going to the March on Washington, which was prolific. And me and—

JA: That comes later.

DA: Yeah, and—but me and Juandalynn being there, and Daddy holding—and Daddy held us and sat with us when Uncle Martin delivered the "I Have a Dream"

speech. And Juandalynn and I jumped up and down, screaming, when he said “his four little children,” because we were the closest to the four little children that day. And that I’ll never forget.

And I’ll never forget Uncle Martin’s birthday party, when Ralph III told him that he got a TV. Remember, Juandalynn? He got a TV, and we walked to the house, and Ralph had a little tan car coat? But we had just moved to Atlanta at that point.

RA: I told—I told the—I couldn’t keep anything. I could never keep anything.

DA: Any secrets.

JA: No, no.

RA: It was a—

JA: He always told.

RA: I always told.

JA: He always told.

RA: And it was supposed to be a surprise to Uncle Martin, and I went and told that he had a TV.

DA: As soon as we arrived at the front door. He greeted us, Uncle Martin and Yoki, and then maybe—I don’t remember Aunt Coretta. But I remember us standing there at the front door, and Ralph was in Daddy’s arms. And as soon as we opened the door, Ralph said, “I know what you’re getting for your birthday!” And Uncle Martin was like, “What?” And Ralph said, “A TV!”

And then, Yoki looked at Juandalynn, because Yoki had told Juandalynn, and Juandalynn looked at me, [0:30:00] and I was like, “Oh, my God!” I remember feeling so ashamed. But, yeah, those moments we’ll never forget, you know.

HJ: Well, you have mentioned your memories—

JA: If you're talking—

HJ: Oh, go ahead, Juandalynn.

JA: If you're talking about those memories, because we're skipping. I thought we were going to go chronologically. But anyway, let's go back to Montgomery.

There was a great—it was a tradition that always took place, and that was when Daddy and Uncle Martin would come back from a trip or from a day's work—we had a refrigerator. Daddy would take Uncle Martin home, or Uncle Martin would bring Daddy home. But I can remember so often Uncle Martin being at our house, 1327 South Hall Street, *all* the time. And I remember when he would come in, we had a tradition of—it was a tradition, I have to say, that Uncle Martin started—and that was he put me on top of the refrigerator. Can you all remember this? On the top of the refrigerator, and then, I would jump down from the refrigerator into Uncle Martin's arms, and then it became a tradition to jump into Daddy's arms. And to remember, even though you have these new refrigerators that look like—the Bosch—the old refrigerators back then, short and round.

DA: Yeah, oval.

JA: Yeah. And that was really tall for a small child. But that was a treat of having our father or having Uncle Martin back in town or back at home, and it was a great memory.

We never talked about the fact that Uncle Martin—Ralph mentioned it, but Uncle Martin and Daddy were partners. Uncle Martin was basically, when you talk about seven days of the week, at least five he was in our home. And every Tuesday, when we moved to Atlanta, we used to go swimming, and that was at the YMCA. Do you all remember

that?

RA: Yes.

DA: Yeah, on Olive Street. Yes, I remember, that was our regular routine.

JA: We were always together as children, the King children and the Abernathy children. I remember having other children around us, to your question, Dr. Jeffries, of whether or not we felt—whether other children were a part of our—played with us. Of course, other children played with us. But extremely close to us were the King children. And I think it was because of the friendship and their relationship and, more importantly, the job or the work that those two ministers were doing pulled the two families together, and that's why they were always around us, and we were always around them.

So, to go back to the question about children, it's true that other parents did have problems and probably were afraid. But [that fear thing] was not a—you know, I cannot sit here and say that we lived in a panic or a fear. The only fear I remember always having was, if my father went away for a long time, whether he was going to be shot or whether he was going to be stabbed or whether he was going to come home again. But he always came home, you know.

DA: Juandalynn, one second. Uncle Martin told us about when he was stabbed. He used to tell us all the time about when he was stabbed with a letter opener.

HJ: In Harlem, in New York.

DA: In Harlem, this strange woman. And, you know, I remember, we would be crawling all over him. And he'd say, "And they stabbed me right here, and if I had *sneezed*, I would have died." And, you know, he prided himself on the fact that he had survived. So, we knew that those things were possible.

And I remember then, so they took us to New York in 1964 to the New York World's Fair, and we had an incredible time, and we stayed at the Riverdale Motor Inn. [0:35:00] And then, when Sidney Poitier won the Academy Award, they took us to California for our summer vacation. So, they never had a summer vacation without us. That's the way we did everything.

RA: The King family.

DA: The King family. And what we would do is we'd have the boys' room, the girls' room, and then Mother and Daddy, and Uncle Martin and Aunt Coretta would have the two rooms off of this living room suite. And, you know, and then, we would swim. And then, that last summer vacation, they didn't have that much money, so they took us to the Hilton at the airport here in Atlanta for our summer vacation for a week. You know, for us, it was fabulous, you know. Just being with them, you know, was great. And I know I'm jumping around, but I know that time is of the essence.

HJ: Absolutely. No, thank you. And actually, I want to ask a little bit about the relationship between, if you could say a little bit more, the relationship between your father and Dr. King. I mean, so much is said about the relationship, but from your perspective, I mean, maybe you could continue—

DA: All I wanted to say, I know that Uncle Martin was always dependent upon Daddy. I know that if anybody wanted to ask Uncle Martin to do anything, they would ask Daddy. And then, Daddy would give his opinion, and then Uncle Martin would do it. Uncle Martin would never make any major decision without running it by Daddy. And they were, you know, close. Daddy was older. Daddy was the strategist. Daddy was the planner. Daddy was, "Well, I think we need to do this." I remember Daddy was the one

who said, “We need to go into Selma,” because, you know, we were from Alabama. And so, that’s when the Movement went to Selma. And Daddy wanted us to go into Birmingham.

So, and then, when Uncle Martin had moved to Atlanta, he was lonely. And Mother said that Uncle Martin used to call—his secretary was Maude, and Daddy’s secretary was Lilly Hunter—and what happened was Uncle Martin would call Daddy every day or every other day, *lonely*, saying “Please come, please come! Come to Atlanta.” And Mother was the one who stood her ground, and she said, “My husband is not coming unless he has a church! And he is not working as a staff person for the SCLC!”

And so, they went—

JA: Well—

DA: You can tell the story, or Ralph, you can tell the story. I know Juandalynn wants to correct me. But, per Mother, she was saying that Daddy had to have a church. And so, Ralph, tell the story of how the church came to be.

RA: Well, I was going to let Juandalynn make her comment. Go ahead, Juandalynn.

JA: I, as a child, don’t remember all about the telephone calling. But Mother had stated to us, and we have grown up knowing that Uncle Martin could not—um, he could not—you know, he couldn’t function without Daddy. And Daddy was the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, which was the largest black church in, actually, in Alabama. And that’s where, basically, the mass meetings took place and the structured meetings for the Montgomery bus boycott, because it was the largest church.

And after Uncle Martin decided that he was going to leave Montgomery and go back to Atlanta to be assistant pastor at Ebenezer, which was his father's church, it never occurred—I never heard from any of my, both of my parents that they were going to go. And apparently, Uncle Martin used to call all the time and said, in fact, you know, he couldn't—they had formed the Movement, and the Movement was formed the evening that our house was bombed, which my mother and I were in. And he just stated that he couldn't do it. And Mother said, "Well, you know, we're not moving, Ralph. I like Montgomery." And my father, of course, liked Montgomery, too, being from Alabama.

And so, therefore, but she did state that, as Donzaleigh said, she did say that Uncle Martin was stating that, okay, he comes, when you all move to Atlanta, then [0:40:00] Daddy could speak, earn his living from speaking. And Mama said, "No. Ralph is a minister." My father was a minister among ministers. And therefore, they had to wait a while. And then, Uncle Martin, or the King family found a church, which later—Ralph can continue—West Hunter Street Baptist Church, which later on called my father to be the pastor of.

And that's how we got to Atlanta, Georgia. But, actually, we had no intentions of actually moving to Atlanta. We were quite, as a family, quite content. The only problem that I remember, as a child, having was the fact that the Kings had moved, and it was just Donzaleigh and I. And we were so close. Donzaleigh and I were very, very close. Ralph was so small, you know. And it was like our life had a hole, you know. There was something missing. And, yeah, of course, when we moved, then it was great, you know, great to see the Kings and be with the Kings.

HJ: And Juandalynn—?

JA: Yeah?

HJ: What year was it that your family moved to Atlanta?

DA: '61.

HJ: '61.

JA: I think we moved in 1961. I think we moved in 1961, because I think Ralph was two years old. Is that correct, Ralph?

RA: Yes, that's correct. I was two, and it was 1961.

DA: And I was four.

RA: Let me say about the relationship between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph David Abernathy, as I have studied over my lifetime that relationship, in trying to understand and define the essence of that relationship. It was one that was based out of a spirit of need and a spirit of love and friendship. I think that what attracted my father to Uncle Martin, and we affectionately called him Uncle Martin and his wife Aunt Coretta, and the King children affectionately called my father Uncle Ralph and my mother Aunt Juanita.

And I think that, from my observation of their relationship, my father was very impressed and very taken to Uncle Martin because of his oratorical skills, as one preacher to another. And he loved good preaching. And my father loved the intellectual aspects of oratorical spiritual message. And he saw early in Martin a special gift to deliver that. I think that what Martin became affectionate for with my father was not just only his courage, because my father was the—had risen to the status of sergeant of his platoon, and that was rare back in that time.

HJ: This was during World War II?

RA: Yeah, during World War II. And so, you know, in order to fight in the Army, you had to have a certain amount of courage and a certain amount of skills to rise to the level of sergeant. But more importantly, my father's intellectual capabilities. He had already pastored two churches prior to Rosa Parks' being arrested. And I always say that most preachers have a degree in Negro management. And so, my father had a skill set because he had pastored two churches. He had demonstrated on two—on college campuses for two issues, the housing and the food conditions in the cafeteria. Both of those demonstrations he led as president of his class—

HJ: This was at Alabama State?

RA: At Alabama State University.

JA: That's right. [0:45:00]

RA: And he had—those two demonstrations had put him in front of the board chairman and trustees of the institution. And so, as a kid in his early teens—eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one—he was talking to the chairman and the trustee board of Alabama State University about the conditions that they lived under and the food that they were being served in the cafeteria. And so, that coupled with his pastoral experience, and then that coupled with his sociology experience, as he received his sociology degree from Atlanta University, I think all of those talents and skills attracted Martin, because those are the things that Uncle Martin didn't have, and he could depend on Ralph to help advise in those areas, when it came to their partnership.

A lot of times when they would speak—and it is in the annals of history, every time Martin Luther King gave a speech, Ralph David Abernathy gave a speech, also. No one else spoke during that time except for—there are no speeches of Andy Young or

Jesse Jackson or Hosea or Joseph Lowery or C.T. Vivian.

DA: They weren't around. They weren't around.

RA: Or any of those individuals. The show was King and Abernathy.

DA: Yeah. And the other thing that I wanted to say really fast, that Ralph is saying, is that that would set the stage for Daddy to meet the ministers in Montgomery after Rosa was arrested and say, "We need to do something," which would then begin the Montgomery bus boycott, you see, because Daddy had had experience with boycotts, which is what he had done at Alabama State. So, that's what he knew, that that's what he was going to do. E.D. Nixon went out of town, so Daddy organized the ministers. And his co-professor, Joanne Robinson, and Mother, they ran off flyers, asking the children—and that's how the bus boycott started. So, my dad had—he conducted the first mass meeting, our father conducted the first mass meeting when he met those ministers. Yeah, so.

RA: I think I lost my train of thought, but I was talking—I was trying to articulate or define their relationship. It was also these two men were men of God. And I think that they had a common admiration for each other's love for God. And so, that kind of was the icing on the cake, so to speak, for that relationship. And when it started in Montgomery, I'm sure that Martin looked at Ralph, and Ralph looked at Martin, and they realized that they had something that each other needed. And so, it started out in Montgomery, and it—they were together—

Oh, I was saying, when they spoke, Ralph David Abernathy spoke about the strategy. He talked about what we're going to do, when we're going to do it, and how we're going to do it. And Uncle Martin talked about *why*, the philosophy of what we're

going to do, why we're going to do it.

And so, when Ralph finished preaching to the crowd, I can hear him now saying, "Don't worry about your children." And I can hear the crowd being concerned. And, "We're going to march tomorrow, and if there's anything that happens to your children, we're going to call Bobby." And the crowd just goes crazy. He's talking about Bobby Kennedy. And then he says, "And if Bobby doesn't do anything, we're going to call John." And, I mean, at that point, I mean, the whole church erupts in just, you know, energy. And he says, "You know, tomorrow we're going to go out here and we're going to march." And, you know, "We're going to go to jail, and everything's going to be alright."

And so, Ralph just kind of told us what we were going to do. And he said, "I'm not going to tell you exactly when we're going to do it, because we've got some Nervous Nannies in the room tonight, and we don't want you all to go back and tell it." And so, he would just kind of, [0:50:00] you know, he would talk about what we're going to do, when we were going to do it, and how we're going to do it, and "this is the strategy of the essence of what we're going to do," giving the people a sense of comfort.

And then, Martin would come behind him and articulate why we're doing this. And that type of partnership changed the course of history. In Mark, the sixth chapter, the seventh verse, it says that, "He called the twelve together and gave them power over unclean spirits." And bigotry, white supremacy, hatred—all unclean spirits. "And he sent them out two by two." And so, God sends his prophets out in twos. And so, that was the—that was a partnership that was steeped in the spirit of God.

And, you know, I think that it's unfortunate that the relationship has not been

studied, for unborn generations and for current generations. Certainly, if we can give Bobby Kennedy to John, or even if we can give Ed McMahan to Johnny Carson, we certainly can give Martin Luther King to Ralph David Abernathy and understand that when two black men came together with no jealousy, with no envy, just in the spirit of love, two men of God come together and change the course of history in the world, you know.

And unfortunately, they've taken the work of two and given it mostly, the credit, to one. But it—for my father, he was alright with that. And the reason why is because he didn't do it for the credit, you know. Neither did Uncle Martin do it for the credit. They did it because it was their calling, and their commitment to God, for whom they served and were called, was their main purpose.

DA: They used to make a joke that “some are called, some are sent, and some just went.” And they used to say they were called.

And I know Ralph is saying a lot about them, but what I wanted to let you know so much about them was they used to dress alike. They used to shop at Muse's and Zimmerman's, and Uncle Martin loved the fact to make sure they had on the same clothes. They wore the same shoes, and they'd wear the same shoes the same day. Same socks. They were like—they called themselves “the twins.”

RA: “The Civil Rights Twins.”

DA: They called themselves “the twins!” And the other thing I wanted to say is, you know, I think they genuinely loved each other. Uncle Martin was a Capricorn, and Daddy was a Piscean, and they loved to dream. They loved to talk about food. They were very simple, and when they were together, there was a calmness between them. There

was a synergy where there was no speaking. And they never said cross words between them. They only had one disagreement ever. One, that was it. Other than that, they would finish each other's sentences. They were in sync. And there was nothing that my mother could do that could separate them. There was nothing Aunt Coretta could do that would separate them. Granddaddy King. No one could come between them. They were just—they were stuck together like glue. And they loved each other.

RA: They were closer than brothers. It's amazing that Daddy King would say that Ralph would be in one part of the country, and Martin would be in another part of the country, and he would ask Martin about a certain situation and seek his advice, and then he would ask Ralph, who's in another part of the country, the same questions, seeking his advice, and the two would be so much alike that he could not remember who said what. That's how much in sync they were.

If I could go back to, just quickly, my childhood, Dexter and I played football.

JA: Just a moment, Ralph. Excuse me, Ralph, can you hold just a second?

RA: Yes.

JA: Okay, Uncle A.D., I thought, as a young teenager, the relationship that the two men had, Uncle Martin and Daddy had, it was understood, [0:55:00] as far as Uncle A.D. was concerned. I never found jealousy there. Uncle A.D. being his brother, there was no jealousy there. It was an understood fact that they were partners. I don't know how—Ralph, you placed it correctly, but he had a brother, and it was an understood fact that Daddy and Uncle Martin were partners. But there was no jealousy. If so, we never felt it. It was never expressed. And I think that was—I think that was great.

RA: That—

JA: But go back to your—I'm sorry about—

RA: That's alright. That's in divine order.

HJ: Let me just say, for the record, A.D. King, being Martin King's brother.

RA: Brother, right.

DA: Right, Alfred Daniel.

HJ: But you were saying—

RA: And that was—and I think the point that Juandalynn is making is a supportive point toward the original point that I was making, which is that it was all in divine order. And that's why it all synced up, that even A.D. had no problem with Ralph and Martin being as close as they were. It was just all in divine order.

DA: Uncle Martin gave Daddy a gold Movado watch, a solid gold watch. And on the back of the watch, he engraved, "To my—" Ralph you have the watch.

RA: "To my dearest friend—"

DA: "And closest associate."

RA: "And closest associate."

JA: Right.

RA: What I was going to say about my childhood growing up, is that Dexter and I integrated, along with Juandalynn, Donzaleigh, and Yoki, our elementary school.

HJ: Here in Atlanta.

RA: Yes.

DA: Spring Street, right where we are.

RA: Spring Street Elementary School, which is now the School for the Puppetry Arts Center. That was the school that Mama chose, and Aunt Coretta followed Mama and

brought the King kids there. And as Donzaleigh had mentioned earlier, we all—the same driver that picked up the King children came and picked up the Abernathy children. This was an all-white school, and Dexter and I were football players. And I was the running back, and Dexter was my blocker. And we would go to Chastain Park and play every Saturday. And for the entire time that Dexter and I played football at Spring Street Elementary School, Spring Street was undefeated. We never lost a game. I ran over everybody, and Dexter blocked over everybody, and the two black kids in the whole park! [Laughter] I mean, Chastain—you had all these elementary schools from all over Atlanta, and we were the only two black kids on the field. And Dexter was my blocker, and I was the running back.

Growing up at Spring Street, I couldn't ever get a little girlfriend, because they all white kids. And I saw all of my white male friends with their little girlfriends, and I wanted a girlfriend so bad. And I just couldn't get one of those white girls to date me. [Laughter] And so, I couldn't, you know—

JA: I didn't have boyfriends either!

RA: And so, I couldn't—you know, I could not, you know, do like the other kids. But the kids were very nice to us. I remember—

DA: Umh! Not to Juandalynn and me.

JA: Oooo! Umh!

RA: They weren't to Juandalynn and—but my male colleagues, my male elementary friends on the football team with me were nice to me. The girls were standoffish.

DA: Right.

RA: And the teachers, the adults, were mean.

DA: They were mean. I remember, well, we integrated the elementary school, Spring Street Elementary School, which would be the first elementary school in Georgia integrated. And it was—after we integrated the school, it was mass integration. And it came right after the Selma to Montgomery March, which we marched on. We were the only black children; we were there in the front lines, marching.

RA: That's me, you, and Juandalynn.

DA: And Juandalynn, on the Selma-to-Montgomery march. We marched two days. They'd give us a salt tablet. Anyway, when we got to the schools, the children would call Juandalynn "Bosco Bear," this boy named Carter Yates. And he kept trying, he said, "I'm going push you down those stairs!" And I was smaller, but growing up, I had this spunk. And Juandalynn used to stutter, and she was, you know, traumatized. And I used to say, "I'll fight you, Carter Yates! I'll fight!" And I'm this little bitty squirt of a thing!

And I'll never forget that one day Ralph had a teacher in the first grade who was mean to him. And I heard her across the hall in my third grade classroom. I walked out of my classroom, went and got Juandalynn from her classroom. We went down and demanded to take Ralph [1:00:00] out of his class, then went to the principal's office and said, "Now, let's call Mother," because it wasn't okay, because we were a family and we were close.

And I'll never forget there was this little girl that was unkind to Juandalynn. And Juandalynn had given her a friendship ring, and the girl had thrown it down the toilet. So, Yoki took to the lower ground [laughs] and sat on the girl! [Laughs] Tell the story,

Juandalynn! Because Yoki and Juandalynn—Yoki would defend Juandalynn, and I had to defend Martin because he was so sweet and so gentle. And I knew that I had to fight, so—and that’s what I would do. I would fight for Juandalynn, for Ralph, and Marty. But Yoki was bigger, and she would take care of stuff.

But, you know, you develop that thing, because we were the only black children. And we’d get to school almost a half an hour before school would start. And the first day that we went to elementary school, the angry parents—

RA: Protesting.

DA: Newspapers, everything, they were there. And so, you know, it was tough.

JA: For me, it was very devastating to go to that school. It was very nice; it was real pretty. It was nicer than the other schools, actually, where we attended when we first moved to Atlanta. But they placed—Yoki, Yolanda, and I were in the same grade. They placed Yolanda in another class, they placed me in another class. We’re in the same grade, now. Donzaleigh and Martin were in the same grade, too. They made Marty in another classroom, Donzaleigh in another classroom, and Dexter and Ralph in separate ones. So, we were just one black person to a complete white class. And they were *not* kind. I can—they became nicer when Ralph was able to show what was athletic talent was and then, of course, you serve a purpose. But I was called every day “Bosco Bear.” I was chastised. I was—you know, it wasn’t very nice.

And I have to admit, my—Ms. Gray was my schoolteacher, and she was *mean!* She taught me, actually—she and Mrs. Montague taught me the lesson that I always had to be better than the other people. From this day on, I must be better than the others, because I was always looked upon. I had to be the example. Even after Martin was killed,

Mrs. Montague came to me and says, “Now, your father is now the leader. Now, you have to be the best in the class.” You always had to be—I always had to be the example for all black children, you know. All eyes were on me. And can you imagine that, being in the sixth grade? I mean, please! Those are pressures! Oh, my God! If you get a C or you get a D on something, you have to—you know, you have to be the best! You have to be the best! And those pressures—and then, the teachers graded you even harder.

DA: Right.

JA: They talked about you. It was—the only teacher that I can remember being very kind to us was the art teacher.

DA: Yes.

JA: And then, I would say Mrs. Montague would be number two. But Ms. Gray, she was *mean*. And Ms. Douglas, she was the principal—

DA: Mean.

JA: You know, racism.

DA: She called—the principal called—

RA: Ms. Douglas was the old wicked witch. I mean, she was—

DA: She called Ralph’s friend, Eric Santacroce’s mother and told her not to let her son let Ralph come and spend the night over at their house. And I was upset by that, because Ralph had a friend who wanted him to come over and hang out. And the principal had a problem with that.

The only thing I have to say is my third grade teacher, Ms. Elliott, was loving. And everybody else had hateful teachers, and I had a loving teacher. And it made a big difference, made me want to go to school and enjoy school. She was so inspiring, because

when Juandalynn learned to read—Juandalynn was left-handed, and that was the time they'd hit you on the hand and make you write with your right hand—so, when she learned to read, I learned to read. So, by the time I got to the third grade, I was smarter than everybody else in my third grade class. I had to keep up with Juandalynn and Yoki.

So, my teacher, Ms. Elliott, was happy that she had this little child [1:05:00] in her class who was articulate, and they put my papers on the learning tree. She had a little tree, and I had all the As at the top of the tree. Well, the PTA came, and they saw that the little black girl's papers were at the top of the tree. And then, Ms. Elliott said to me, "Donzaleigh, I'm sorry, I can no longer put your papers at the top. I have to put them at the bottom and at the back." I said, "Why?" She said, "I'm sorry." She told me and she taught me about racism. When this one little boy, Wesley, would call me "nigger," she said, "That's because he loves you, Donzaleigh." I said, Ms. Elliott, I know better than that."

But she shielded me and protected me, which prepared me for the situation. But I was blessed, whereas Ralph's first teacher was *brutal*, Juandalynn's teachers were *brutal*. But by the time I got to the fourth grade, the teachers put me in the back of the room and ignored me. It didn't matter how many times I raised my hand.

So, what my mother did was she took us to the Learning Foundation right down on Spring Street. So, we would leave school every day, go to the Learning Foundation, and Brother Clint, this white monk in a robe, would hug us, love us, and have him sit on my lap. I'd sit on his lap, as he'd teach us things that the teacher, the white teacher, wouldn't teach us in the classroom. This white man would give to us the love that this white woman would take away every day. And it—we wouldn't get home till, what,

seven o'clock?

RA: I used to hate the Learning Center. [Laughs]

JA: [Laughs]

DA: [Laughs] Well, I loved that we went to the Learning Center, because we learned, and it didn't matter how much they ignored us in the classroom, we still learned.

HJ: Now, did you feel some of the same pressures that your sister was talking about?

DA: Well, yeah, we had to do twice as much to get half as far. And because I was the best runner in my class, when they would pick teams, I was the first girl always chosen, because I could outrun and I could do the kickball. And we were athletic, and that's where we would shine, was our athleticism on the field. But, yeah.

But, you know, my third grade teacher was loving. My fourth grade teacher was brutal, my fifth grade teacher, my sixth grade, seventh grade. But I had already had the foundation from my third grade teacher. And the librarian, Ms. Cheatham, a black woman, came. And she spoke French, and so I learned French. And we wanted to live in another country, and that's why Juandalynn lives in Europe now.

HJ: Because time is a little bit short, and I want to sort of move us forward a little bit. You know, what's often overlooked, as people talk about the Civil Rights Movement or reflect about it, is the role of children. And you three, as children, had a front row seat and were often on the front line of many of the major, if not all of the major demonstrations in the Movement. Could you say a little bit about sort of being active as children in some of these historic events: the March on Washington, Selma to Montgomery March? You've already told us that.

RA: Let me first be the one to articulate that. I understand the strategy of my father and Uncle Martin in the involvement of young people and children. Young people are looking for change, and old people hope things don't change. And so, for young children to be participating, and it was many children that participated. And I think that's why our father, because it was his movement, as much it was his partner's, he felt that his children—if he's asking other people to bring their children to the Movement, then *his* children needed to be a part, so they could see that he was as committed to be involved in including his children in the Movement, as he is asking everyone else to include their own.

And so, we became, I guess, like the poster child of the Movement, because we participated in every March. But we were prepared, because children are strong, and they're resilient, and they bounce back. And there is a sense of fearlessness, even in an environment of fear. And so, for us, I was the rambunctious kid that just—it was my total playground, the Movement. And Juandalynn and Donzaleigh were kind of my security blankets. And Donzaleigh was my greatest nemesis, as a child growing up. [1:10:00] And so, you know, but they were my protectors, Juandalynn and Donzaleigh. And so, I could just be the rambunctious kid. I was all over the place, wild, crazy, just energetic, and just—it was a field day for me to participate in the Movement. We were one great big happy family.

JA: That's right.

RA: And I think that was really the reason why my father and my mother insisted that we participate. And I'm so thankful now, because there are documented pictures of our involvement, whereas other children don't have the benefit of that. And—

Donzaleigh?

DA: Well, one thing I wanted to say was I remember when we were taking the drive from Atlanta back to Montgomery to stay at Mama Dessa's for us to do the Selma to Montgomery March.

HJ: This is 1965.

DA: 1965. I loved it! And we were with Riley Lewis, and so, we rode down in the car, down Highway 80, which is where we would go to visit our grandmother and my daddy's family. So, we were down, our family—we had to go down Highway 80 anyway. That was our road.

HJ: Which connects Montgomery to Selma.

DA: To Selma, um-hmm. And so, I'll never forget going that day. I was so excited! We were going on a march! And we got all dressed. This was the first day. We put on those casual clothes, and we walked. And I remember we were walking with a man with one leg, a white man with crutches.

RA: Sunshine!

DA: No, his name was Jim Letherer.

RA: Okay.

DA: Jim Letherer.

JA: Sunshine was black.

DA: Yeah.

RA: Oh, that's right. Sunshine was black.

DA: And I'll never forget marching with him, because we walked on the front lines with him. And that was very exciting.

RA: I remember that.

DA: And then, I remember that night. That night we had the mass meeting, and there were all the movie stars. We sat on our daddy's lap. And there are pictures of us waiting to get our kiss from Uncle Sammy, and Juandalynn saying we wouldn't—we vowed we'd never wash our faces again. And I also—

RA: That's Sammy Davis, Jr.

DA: Sammy Davis, Jr., Uncle Sammy. And then, I remember standing backstage and watching Peter, Paul and Mary. And Mary had that long yellow hair, and they were warming up. And I loved it! And then, I remember going into the tent behind, and they were counting the money, as I sat on daddy's lap. Because no matter what, even though he started as the treasurer, he always made sure and counted the money and sat on the money. At the end of the day, they gave my dad the money, because my dad was the one who was—the money was going to go to where it was supposed to go. And I sat there. I saw the hundred dollar bills that the movie stars had given! And I just remember—I was mesmerized. It was great. I saw those piles of money. It was just incredible!

And then, that following day, I'll never forget. The following morning, it rained a little bit, and Mother put us on those accordion rain caps. Uncle Martin had not come to join the march yet. And Ralph III—Daddy wanted Ralph and wanted us to hold hands. I didn't want to hold Ralph's hand. I wanted to hold Juandalynn's hand.

RA: I told you that was my nemesis. [Laughs]

JA: [Laughs]

DA: And I wanted Juandalynn to be in the middle. And we started that march. And then, I remember, when we got to the capitol, and Uncle Martin said, "How long?"

Not long!” I said, “This is going to be a great speech.” I knew it. And I remember doing—he would do an arm thing. “Not long, because no lie will live forever!” I’ll never forget that!

And then, I remember when we went to Chicago and we got tear gassed, and they were throwing bottles. That was another march. And then, they were like, “Okay, we have to get in the cars!”

HJ: Is this Cicero?

DA: Cicero, uh-huh.

JH: In ’66.

DA: In ’66. And I remember they were throwing us into the cars! And I just—I’ll never forget. And we were all crowded in on top of the adults. And Bernard Lee—I just remembered Bernard Lee being there with us in Chicago.

RA: That was Uncle Martin’s assistant.

DA: Uncle Martin’s assistant.

RA: Reverend Bernard Lee.

DA: But, I mean, I’m just throwing out here these—

JA: Uncle Martin’s traveling companion.

HJ: Yes?

JA: His traveling companion.

RA: Yes, his traveling companion.

DA: But, I mean, those were just two distinct marches, beyond the March on Washington. I don’t remember—Mother tells the story of when we were on the James Meredith march in Mississippi, and how Ralph needed to use the restroom. And she was

getting out of line, and the policeman told her not to move. And she said, “My little boy needs to go to the bathroom, and I am taking him out of this line,” because my mother, she has fire in the belly, fire in the soul. And Uncle Martin loved that fire in the soul! I think that’s what makes her so great and why she’s still alive today! [1:15:00] Anyway, Juanita was like, “Okay, I’m taking my child,” and she took him! There was nothing anyone could say to my mother that would stop her!

And this is the other thing we haven’t told—you know, they liked to play cards. Mother and Uncle Martin played cards. Daddy was deeply religious. He was like, [imitating her father] “Cards? Okay, let’s play cards.” But Daddy and Aunt Coretta were not into it like Mother and Uncle Martin. And, see, they had to play against each other. Because anything Mother would say, or he would say, they would, you know, one up each other. They had a test of wit between them. And I think that was why he loved her so much, because they liked to spar together, you know, and he always wanted to know what Juanita thought.

And then, right before he passed, that last week or so, he wanted to come to our house and spend that vacation. And my job was to get Aunt Coretta situated into the room. But then, Juandalynn and Ralph should tell those stories, because I don’t want to dominate the time.

HJ: Juandalynn, we have a few more minutes, but I want to get your feedback on this real quick, your thoughts on some of these memories and reflections of participating.

JA: I just wanted to make a statement to you. You talked about the children’s participation in the Movement. And I want to say that Daddy told me, as a child, it was very important for—it was important to him that we participate, that we would be a part

of history, that we would *see* and witness what happened. That was very important for him. He stated it. He wanted it. And that's why we participated more than other children, because he was dead set on the fact that we had to see it.

And I remember Yolanda stating, I mean, many, many, many years, as young adults, she was jealous. She said, "Juandalynn, I'm so jealous, because we were never—" they weren't there. "And you all got a chance to do this, and you all got a chance to see this. And you were there and you did this." And they weren't. And I said, "I'm so sorry." I didn't, you know, I didn't know. But Daddy's purpose, he specifically, and I know it came from him, he specifically said that he wanted us to be a part. He wanted us to witness history and be a part of history.

HJ: You know, having been a witness to history and having been a part of history and the Movement in such a visible profound way, how did those experiences—and if I could just have each of you just weigh in on this—how did those experiences inform and influence your career choices down the road, either in politics or acting or singing? Maybe Ralph, we could begin with you.

RA: Well, quickly, I—it had a tremendous impact on my life and my career choices. Everybody used to say, "That boy is going to preach. Little Ralph is going to preach." And I didn't want to preach. And I didn't have—I didn't think that what had happened to Daddy and Uncle Martin was a good thing. And so, preaching wasn't something I wanted to do. And so, I chose an alternative, still in public service, and served the state of Georgia as a senator and also served in the House of Representatives. And then, finally, through some spiritual changes and some mishaps in life, I ended up accepting my calling. And now, I have—have now have moved up and have my

doctorate in theology now, from the North Carolina College of Theology.

So, it has really—you know, and I didn't realize it, but I've just—I guess a lot of people, when they see me, and I'm preaching, they say, "Boy, you look just like your daddy, and you preach like him!" And, you know, my mother, which is to me the greatest compliment that I could receive, and also from—I can hear Ms. Velma Johnson, who is in West Hunter, saying—Mama would say she's dancing in heaven now, because she predicted I was going to preach when I was three or four years old. And so, you know, I've evolved into my daddy, you know, following in his footsteps—and even my move to do some national work across the country.

DA: But the thing of it is Ralph used to, [1:20:00] you know, on Sunday morning, while we were getting ready to go to Sunday School, we'd be downstairs in the little den at the house on Serow Street, and Ralph would be preaching!

RA: Yes.

DA: He would preach the sermon that we would get before we even got to church!

RA: And Juandalynn and Donzaleigh would be my audience and my amen corner.

[Laughs]

DA: [Laughs] We would be his audience. So, we knew.

JA: [Laughs]

RA: What age? What age were we?

DA: Oh, you started preaching about four and five.

RA: Yeah.

DA: And so, we knew he was going to do that, even though he said he didn't want

to do it. And I knew when I saw the movie stars at the March on Washington that that's what I wanted to do, because my grandmother watched those old movies. And she had broken her hip, so she was staying with us. So, I knew the movie stars when I saw them. And I was, like, that's what I wanted to do. I didn't want to do what Daddy and Uncle Martin were doing, because that was dangerous. You could get killed.

RA: Right.

DA: But the movie stars could be socially-minded, plus you got to do dress up and make up and play stuff. And that's what we used—we used to make these, do these plays for our parents. And Yoki would direct, I would kiss the boy, and Juandalynn would sing. And Juandalynn—Aunt Mahalia had to have her sing, the baby sing. So, Juandalynn, tell them, because Mahalia Jackson would stay at our house, and she thought my sister had the most beautiful voice, and Juandalynn—it was her destiny.

JA: It was my destiny. It was no movement, actually, for me to sing. I was born singing. I remember as a—I couldn't have been any more than a year, year and a half. People think, "You can remember that far back?" Of course! I remember putting my feet between the baby bed, and always kicking and, I don't know, [sings] "La-la-la-la-la." And my mother had a radio that was on her nightstand, and that was exactly next to my bed, and classical music was always on. So, I always sang. I've *always* sung.

What I liked about the marches, growing up, is the fact that they had all these beautiful songs that they sung. [Sings] "Ain't going to let nobody turn me around," expressing things like that, and it was just—ah! It was a wonderful opportunity to sing together, and that's where I learned a lot of these Negro spirituals and a lot of these Freedom songs. And to march next to—Hosea Williams had a beautiful voice—and it

was really great to *sing!*

But I was always destined to sing. I was always going to be a singer. In fact, Aunt Mahalia, Mahalia Jackson, said back then, when she would come visit, she would say, “Juandalynn, sing for me.” And then, I would say, “Well, Aunt Mahalia, I have three voices!” And then, I would sing low, and then I would sing—I didn’t know about registers back then—and then I would show my opera voice, and then I would, you know, sing like other people, just normal people, and then I would sing like men. And then, she would say, “Oh, my God! She’s going to be a—you know, she’s going to be a singer.”

DA: She’s going to be a singer.

JA: It was, you know, it was destined.

DA: Um-hmm.

JA: And I would always sounded, as a child, like an adult.

DA: An adult.

JA: My voice was always mature. I was born that way.

DA: Um-hmm.

JA: So, for me, the Movement was just another playground on which I could have the opportunity to sing with other people. But I was always going to be a singer. There was no question. It was in my blood.

HJ: You know, I’m hearing revelry in the background. [Laughs] So, that’s—

JA: Yes! I think they’re blowing the horn or something.

HJ: Clearly, clearly. I hate to bring this to a conclusion, because there’s so much more that we could talk about, and you have all lived such rich and wonderful lives. But, unfortunately, we have to bring it to a conclusion. I want to thank Juandalynn Abernathy,

Donzaleigh Abernathy, Ralph David Abernathy, III, for sharing your personal memories, experiences, and reflections.

JA: Thank you.

DA: It needs to be continued because he didn't talk about being arrested and the Poor People's Campaign, and we didn't talk about the Food Stamp Program that came to be that Daddy made happen, the meal program, affirmative action, all the wonderful things that he did. So—

HJ: Well, we'll see about if we can continue once we lose the connection.

JA: And the holiday, the holiday.

HJ: And the holiday, absolutely.

DA: And the holiday. My dad made the holiday. It originated in his soul.

JA: That's my father, that's my father.

DA: Our father.

HJ: So, let's wrap up now, and see if we can't do a [1:25:00] Part Two. So, thank you so much.

RA: Thank you.

DA: Thank you.

RA: Thank you, and God bless you.

DA: A pleasure. Thank you.

JA: Thank you for having us. Thank you, and God bless you.

HJ: Okay, yeah.

[Recording stops and then resumes.]

HJ: Now, John, do you need me to—?

EN: Yes, do the intro.

JB: Yeah, just say that we lost the connection, but that we're continuing without her.

HJ: Are we ready?

JB: We're rolling.

HJ: Good afternoon. We lost the connection with your sister, Juandalynn, in Germany, but we have a few minutes to continue this conversation. And we have Ralph David Abernathy, III, and Donzaleigh Abernathy. And Ralph David, you were going to say a little bit about the time you were arrested during the Poor People's Campaign and the Mule Train March in 1968.

RA: Yes. Yes I, in—June fifteenth, 1968, coming from Marks, Mississippi, on our way to Washington, D.C., I was arrested in Georgia. Now, we had come through Mississippi and Alabama, all the way up to Georgia. And when we got to Georgia, Lester Maddox arrested us.

HJ: The governor.

RA: Yes, Governor Lester Maddox. And he arrested all sixty-seven of us. And I think it was probably about thirty-something children who were on the march. And we spent the night in a U.S. Armory, because there were so many of us they didn't have a jail big enough to hold us. And so, we got arrested and spent the night in jail, and they kept our mules.

There is a documentary called, on YouTube, entitled *Journey of the Mule Train*, and that is an interview with myself and the mayor of Douglasville, Georgia, where we got arrested. They stopped us in Douglasville, Georgia, and the National Guard Armory

is where we spent the night, and we were released the next day. And we left there and went on to West Hunter Street Baptist Church there on what is on now Martin Luther King Drive. And that's where we met my father and my mother.

I will never forget the fear of the arrest, as well as the spirit of the people. And they were very warm people in Douglasville that came out and fed us. You know, I had a sense of calmness because everybody was alright and everything was good.

HJ: And you were only nine years old?

RA: Yes, I was nine. And so, I was a little fearful initially, but then my spirit settled down, and everything was fine for the rest of the evening and into the night. And the next morning we met back at West Hunter Street Baptist Church, and I'll never forget my mother and my father coming up to me and saying to me, "Are you alright? Is everything fine? Are you alright?" And I'll never forget telling them, said, "Well, I'm fine. Daddy and Uncle Martin, you all used to do this all the time, you know, so what's the big deal?" You know? And I'll never forget that particular moment. Donzaleigh may know or remember more about it than I do, because she's older than I am. And, Donzaleigh, you may—

DA: I just knew that they were going to be going to jail, and I wanted to be on that mule train. And Mother said, "You cannot go because you are a girl." And I was so upset. They were like, "There's going to be no one there in the jail cell with you," and Hosea Williams, Uncle Hosea, didn't want me to go. And I was devastated. I was, like, "I can go! I can go! I can go!" And it was like, "No, you can't go." And Ralph went, and sure enough, they—I *knew* they were going to get arrested and I wanted to be arrested! I wanted to have that opportunity, you know.

RA: It was kind of like, as Donzaleigh articulated it, my baptismal into the Civil Rights Movement at that arrest. And that gave me something that no other child in the leadership of the Movement, between those two families, no other child can ever claim that they actually experienced being arrested marching for freedom, justice, equality, and for the success of all people in America.

DA: Well, what I do want to say is I remember, see, Daddy and Uncle Martin were men's men. And we would, when they would come into the airport, we would go to meet them. And we'd meet them at the gate. And sometimes there'd be a camera. And everybody liked to walk on the front line with Daddy and Uncle Martin. [1:30:00] And I would walk backwards with a camera.

And then, we'd get the main part of the airport, the old Atlanta airport, and Mother—I remember Mother and Aunt Coretta and Yoki and Juandalynn went to the bathroom to get all dolled up for dinner. And Ralph and Marty and Dexter would run around with their shirttails hanging out and just run crazy. And I always wanted to be with Daddy and Uncle Martin and carry the briefcase. And they'd be like, "No, Donzaleigh, don't carry the briefcase."

Anyway, on this particular time, I found out that they were going to be riding on this little bitty plane. And they were talking, as they did their little press conference, and I'm standing there with the media, listening to them. I didn't stand with them. I would always be with the media. And then, they walked away.

And I said to Daddy—he was talking about the little plane. And I said, "Can I go? Can I go?" And he said, "No, Donzaleigh, you can't go because you're a girl." And Uncle Martin said, "You know, Ralph, that's an idea. We need to take the boys." And

they took them! On that little bitty plane!

RA: Yep, we had so much fun!

DA: They had so much fun. I was so devastated. I was like—oh, I was just crushed! I was just so crushed. There were those things that they gave guys; they gave the boys those opportunities.

But I also used to remember that, you know, we used to go to the Southeastern Fair, and I loved—my dad was a farmer. We come from farming people. And so, the first place we would start, well, we would get—you know, we liked to go in the evening. That's when Daddy and Uncle Martin would take us. And they'd wave a hundred dollars in front of us, just wave the money, and then, you know, we could—they were going to spend that money. We could eat anything we wanted, ride on every ride. We'd start looking at the livestock first, the hogs and the cows. And then, finally, we'd go and ride on the roller coaster, the rinky-dinky roller coaster. We'd eat cotton candy and those hot dogs with cornbread around them. And then, as the evening would wind down, Daddy and Uncle Martin would disappear, and they would go down that little side where they have a little sideshow. Well, we were not allowed to go. They'd have the bearded lady and all of that stuff. And we'd be like, "We're ready! We're ready! Can't we come?" And they'd stop us. But I remember that that was—it was just so much fun!

And I do remember that we could not go to FunTown, which is what he wrote about in the Letter from the Birmingham Jail, how disappointing and how hurtful it was that he couldn't take Yolanda to FunTown. And then, I remember when we went to New York to that World's Fair and staying at the Riverdale Motor Inn. And then, being on the subway, my dad giving us the experience of being on the subways for the first time. And,

oh my goodness, there was so much! There were so many things that happened to me, there are so many memories that come flooding. And we would meet each other every Sunday after church, and the first—

HJ: The families?

DA: The families. We'd always have Sunday dinner together, every Sunday.

RA: Yes.

DA: And then, on the first Sunday, Ralph and Dexter and Martin, especially Ralph and Dexter, would run to wherever, whichever church they would go, downstairs, to get the Welch's grape juice, which was the communion juice.

RA: Yes.

DA: And the ladies would pour up all the little pieces in the little leftover—

RA: The cups that were left over.

DA: Pour it up into a little cup, so Ralph could have a nice big cup, Ralph and Dexter. And I'd be like, by the time I'd get there, there would be nothing for me. And I was just—I would be so upset.

And I do remember another thing was I remember when Daddy came to the pulpit and asked us to bow our heads in prayer because the bomb had gone off at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. And we were sitting in church that Sunday. And I'll never forget it. I was with my friend Judy and I was making—she was sort of heavy. I always remember saying to her, "You know, you're so heavy I could stick a pin in you, and you would deflate." You know, children say horrible little things like that. And after church on that particular Sunday—we would run around the side of the church waiting for Daddy, and then we would go meet with the King family.

And on this particular Sunday, I ran along the side of the church and I *froze* because the bomb had gone off, and I thought, “Oh, my God! If I go any further, the bomb is going to go off. I’m going to die. I’m going to die.” And I just stood there. And Ralph was ahead of me. He was like, “Come on, Donzaleigh! Come on!” And I was like—I couldn’t move. And my brother, I’ll never forget, you came back and you gave me your hand. And you were like, [speaking gently] “Come on. Come on.” And he took me through my fear from the side, because there was this house and there was a teeny-weeny little alleyway.

RA: Little alley.

DA: That little alley, and it was next to the—

RA: Alex—

DA: Alex—

RA: Barbecue.

DA: Barbecue!

RA: Right.

DA: And the shoeshine parlor!

RA: Right.

DA: And Ralph pulled me through my fear. And that was on that Sunday. That was September fifteenth, 1963, [1:35:00] when they bombed the church. I’ll never forget that, that particular day. And after that, I never used the bathroom, the public bathroom, at West Hunter Street Baptist Church, only in my father’s office. And I would never use the public restroom at the church until Juandalynn got married.

RA: Um-hmm.

HJ: Because that's where the girls were.

RA: Yes.

DA: Um-hmm, in the bathroom.

RA: When the bomb went off.

DA: So, I would never use it. And I would hold myself. I just wouldn't go to the bathroom. Because we were guilty, you know, we had participated in all of the events of the Civil Rights Movement. And then, when Uncle Martin died, I'll never forget that night. Ralph and I stood together on the tarmac. We rode with Mother. Otis Smith took us, drove us. He came to the house and then drove us out to the airport.

HJ: Well, how did you guys—how did you hear? Was it your mother?

RA: TV.

DA: TV. No, what happened was, Julie Clements, she was Juandalynn's friend at Spring Street, her mother called. And she told Mother to turn on the television, because our television wasn't turned on, because we weren't allowed to watch TV during the week, only the news. And she told Mother to turn on the television, and I think Juandalynn turned on the television. And then, we heard that he had been shot. And then, Juandalynn started screaming, and she ran back into the bedroom. And we had our own children's line, and she called Yoki, and so, she and Yoki were commiserating over the phone. And then the phone calls started coming in, and then families came over. The Revere family came, and then Dr. Otis Smith and his wife, Gwen Smith.

And Mother—Andy Young had called and told Mother to pack her bag. She was going to get this plane and go to Memphis with Aunt Coretta. And so, Ralph and I rode in the car. And I remember telling Juandalynn and Yoki on the phone, "Remember when

Uncle Martin told us he had been stabbed and, you know, he survived? And they shot him. He's going to live! He serves a purpose! God's using him. He's doing good. God won't let him die. That's just not going to happen." And so, I was just being super positive, and Yoki and Juandalynn were crying. And so, Ralph and I got in the car, and we drove. And it was the first time we'd ever driven 285 to go to the airport, because we used to drive 20 to go to the airport. And we drove 285, and it was the longest ride.

When we finally got to the airport, I remember we walked all the way out to the tarmac. And Ralph and I were standing there, and Mother went over to meet Aunt Coretta. And I just remember seeing Mother and Aunt Coretta embrace, and apparently, that's when Mayor Ivan Allen had told Aunt Coretta that Uncle Martin had died. And when I saw Mother and Aunt Coretta embrace, that's when I started crying. And some man turned his camera on our faces, and I saw pictures, movie footage pictures of it years later. But it was devastating. So, then, Uncle Otis took us back in the car back home.

And Mother, I always thought for years had gotten on the plane and gone to Memphis to meet Daddy. But instead, Mother went home with Aunt Coretta, slept on Uncle Martin's side of the bed, because Aunt Coretta wanted to tell her children face-to-face what had happened to their father. And then, the following morning, they got the plane and they went to Memphis. And the next time we would see him, he would be coming down in a box in the backside of the plane. And I'll never forget seeing that.

And then, we rode in the limousines and we rode to Hanley Brothers Funeral Home. And we left him there. And that was devastating. Daddy was devastated. I remember him sitting in the bedroom in the dark, with the curtains drawn and everything, and he just, like, he was *depressed* beyond belief. And I remember, you know, we had a

pool table built and put in our basement because Uncle Martin's favorite game was pool. He liked to shoot pool.

RA: He taught me how to play pool.

DA: And I remember going—

RA: Daddy couldn't play. [Laughs]

DA: Daddy couldn't play that well, but we had a pool table just for Uncle Martin in our house. And I said to Daddy, I remember I was downstairs with him one time, and I said, "You know, Daddy, I'll play pool with you. I'll do for you what Uncle Martin did for you." But I never could. Nothing could ever fill that void. And recently, I was talking with J.T. Johnson, who used to travel with Daddy. And J.T. said that he'd be on the road with Daddy, and they'd finish whatever they were doing and they'd go back to the hotel room, and he'd sit on the side of the bed and start sobbing.

HJ: Your father.

DA: Would sob, yeah. And he'd talk about [1:40:00] how much he missed him and how lonely he was.

RA: Well, let me just say that in the involvement of the assassination, my greatest fear was that, when I heard Uncle Martin had been shot, I was thinking the same thing about Daddy. My mind went immediately to my father. And I was wondering—I wanted to hear—"Is Daddy alright? Is Daddy alright?" They shared the same room at the Lorraine Motel. It's a museum now, and if you go, there are two beds in that room. That is now Dr. King's room. It was King and Abernathy's room. Abernathy was in one bed, and King was in the other.

And on that fatal evening or early afternoon, Uncle Martin—they had a deal that

whoever took the longest to get dressed got dressed first. And my father—it took him an hour just to shave, and so he would get dressed first. And he was out on the balcony first. And he was waiting on Uncle Martin, and when Uncle Martin came out on the balcony, he smelled Uncle Martin’s Aero Mist cologne.

DA: They wore the same cologne.

RA: Yeah, they had the same cologne. He said, “Martin, I forgot to put my Aero Mist on.” And Martin Luther King said, “Well, Ralph, I’ll be out here on the balcony waiting on you.” And so, when he was shot, he was waiting for Ralph David Abernathy. Daddy went back into the bathroom, and he put the cologne in his hand. And he heard what sounded to him like firecracker shots. And he immediately thought: Martin.

And he went to the front, and Uncle Martin was there, laying down. And the first person to make it up from the ground was Andy Young. And he ran up and said, “Oh, no! It’s over! It’s over! It’s over!” And Daddy said, “Andy, shut up and go in the bathroom and get some towels.” Because he said he didn’t want Martin to hear that.

DA: Um-um.

RA: And he put the towels and wrapped him and place his cheek back up on his face and said, “Martin, it’s Ralph. It’s Ralph. Everything is going to be alright.”

DA: And he tried to move his lips, but nothing would come out. He tried to speak.

RA: And he just kept soothing him, “Martin, Martin, it’s Ralph. Everything’s going to be fine.” And Uncle Martin, Daddy said, had a certain sense of calmness that came across his face. And Bernard Lee, who my sister had mentioned earlier, who was Uncle Martin’s traveling companion and assistant, was a short preacher, and he had a kind of a Napoleonic complex. And he wouldn’t let anybody ride in the ambulance with

Martin Luther King except for Ralph David Abernathy. And so, Daddy got in the ambulance.

And Daddy said he committed what he called civil disobedience when he refused to leave the operating room as they worked on him. And they worked on him. And then, they worked on him and they came over and they said, “What we’re about to do now we do for important people,” and they caught themselves and realized they were talking to Dr. Abernathy and said, “We mean this is what we would do for presidents and people of that nature, heads of state.” And they put this machine, Daddy said, down on Uncle Martin. And then, they came over and said, “There’s nothing more we can do.” And Daddy went over to the gurney and cradled him in his arms, and he took his last breaths in my father’s arms.

And at that point, Uncle Martin had set the organization up in such a way that by acclamation Ralph David Abernathy would immediately become president in the case of his demise.

HJ: Of SCLC.

RA: Of SCLC. And so, I understood why they set it up in such a way where Uncle Martin, if anything happened, Daddy would take over as the leader of the Civil Rights Movement. They didn’t—the staff didn’t want to do the Poor People’s Campaign, and this is all documented in history.

DA: Before you go to the Poor People’s Campaign—

RA: Well, I’m not going to go there. I was just going to mention that Daddy completed work. Somebody had to finish the business. The Movement didn’t end with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. [1:45:00] Someone had to finish it up. And

Ralph David Abernathy, who was there when it started, was—in Donzaleigh’s book, had the courage to walk alone, pick up that mantle of leadership, and finish the Movement.

And if you look back on history, you know, there will be those who debate the success of the Poor People’s Campaign. There will be those who would debate the decline of the energy behind the Civil Rights Movement. There will be those who would say that Ralph David Abernathy was not as articulate or was not as charismatic, and the fading of the Civil Rights Movement after Martin Luther King. There will be those that would say that the Movement was deemed to be not so successful because they had accomplished all of these civil rights legislation and all of the different victories during the lifetime of the leadership of Martin Luther King and Ralph David Abernathy, that after the assassination everything went downhill.

And I would suggest to you that it was just the opposite. Whenever you bring thousands of poor people or people, period, to Washington D.C. to say to, if you will, the pharaohs of our time, “Let our people go, and feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, and provide services for children,” that’s a success. During that time when this nation was on fire and cities were being burned across America, it was the words of Ralph David Abernathy which calmed that beast that was rising up across America over the assassination of our fallen brother and leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. Ralph Abernathy said, “Nonviolence is the weapon of the strong, and violence is the weapon of the weak,” and that we’re going to—I will never forget his words. He said, “For all those who tarry at the grave or who linger in the cemetery, I’ve got news for you. We have business on the road to freedom. And we are going to show America that you may be able to kill the dreamer, but you cannot kill the dream.” And so, he gets credited for carrying on the

Movement and continuing it, finishing it, and picking up that mantle of leadership and carrying it across the finish line.

DA: What I wanted to say is my daddy used to say, “When you look at a man, you have to look at the courage in the man.” And he used to say that Uncle Martin had fear, but he rose above, and that’s when he had courage. He went forward in the face of fear. And that when they were on that plane to go to Memphis that last time—I’m sorry to backtrack, but this is where I wanted to talk about, was that they sat together on the airplane. And they kept the plane on the ground because there had been a bomb threat. And the pilot came on and said there was a bomb threat and that he made the announcement that Dr. King was on the plane.

And Uncle Martin said to Daddy, “Why do they have to do it this way? Why do they have to taunt me?” And so, they were taunting him and telling him that they were going to kill him. And that’s why when he said, “I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,” it meant so much. Because on that particular night, when they went to the Mason Temple, Uncle Martin sent Daddy on ahead.

HJ: April third 1968.

DA: April third 1963. He sent Daddy on ahead.

RA: 1968.

DA: 1968. And Daddy didn’t— [1:50:00] he arrived there and saw that the crowd was for Uncle Martin. And so, he got to the phone and he called him and asked him to come. And then, Uncle Martin reluctantly came, but he came. And, see, that’s when he, you know, the spirit engulfed him, and he had risen up above his fear. And he had

courage.

And they knew that they weren't going to live forever. And I remember my mother always, you know, being upset that they were sacrificing their lives and they were giving so much, and she was afraid that they were going to be killed. And so, the question was: When? You know, because Medgar Evers had been killed, and my dad was the one who told us that Medgar had been killed in the driveway in front of his family, and they couldn't come outside to get him. And so, they were trying to prepare us. And so, you know, we—I guess they knew that Uncle Martin was going to be killed, assassinated, at some point.

Mother was telling me last night, early in the morning as we were lying in bed this morning, that—because I slept on my father's side of the bed—that she has this sweater that Uncle Martin said, "Juanita, keep this and remember me." And she said, "Remember you? What do I need this to remember you?" He said, "Because. You just keep this and remember me." And so, she was telling me about this sweater that she had, his sweater, Uncle Martin's sweater that he had given to her. And then, I said, "Well, Mother, I have another sweater I have of Uncle Martin's, a gray cashmere sweater that he gave to Daddy, that I have, that has holes in it, and then Daddy gave to me."

But Uncle Martin was always trying to leave something behind because, you know, it was almost like they were on borrowed time. I remember Daddy wrote that—he wrote in a speech, when they were leaving Montgomery for Atlanta, they had "a date with destiny and a rendezvous with eternity" and that they knew that they were doing something great and that they knew that they had to do it.

And my dad used to always say that somebody has to be in the background and

that he chose to be that person in the background to keep everybody at bay, to keep everybody calm. I remember going to the SNCC offices, and the young people were yelling at each other, and my dad was like calming them down, trying to keep SNCC in line so that Uncle Martin could do what he did.

HJ: SNCC here in Atlanta.

DA: SNCC here in Atlanta. To keep everybody in line so that they could have a united front. Because, otherwise, if we have all these people rising up, trying to—then you'd have too many chiefs and no Indians. So, my dad was there, calming everybody, keeping everybody, all the organizations calm, so that we'd have one head, so that then we would be one united front to go forward. Because there has—you've got to have a support system. You know, if you thought it was one person alone, then you could never re-create. But when you look at my dad's book, his book, he teaches you how they did it, how they worked as a team. And it was important so that, you know, it could happen again.

And the thing that I think is so important is that with Daddy and Uncle Martin, it would actually be the first time in the history of our country that black people would actually rise up. We had endured, you know, so much, two hundred and forty-four years of slavery, a hundred years of Jim Crow, but never were we organized. W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington didn't know how to work together. But the thing that made it so great was Daddy and Uncle Martin knew how to work together.

And my daddy used to say, "You can lure more bees with honey than with vinegar." You know, sweeten that, put that smile on there, sugarcoat that thing! And, you know, and when they made the demands in Montgomery, I guess they asked for maybe

seven things, thinking they would only—that they would never get. Put those demands that you're not going to get, because you hopefully will get the four that you really do want. And you have to out-think your opponent. But the only way you could do it was to create a team, a united team. And that's what Daddy was about, trying to create that—like, and when Andrew Young would then want to run for Congress, my dad took his entire SCLC staff and budget and *paid* for Andy to run for Congress until he was elected.

And when Granddaddy King needed to bury Uncle Martin, he called. He said, “Ralph, Ebenezer won't give me the land.” And my dad says, “I'll give you the money.” And my dad gave the money to where Martin Luther King and Aunt Coretta are buried today. Ralph David Abernathy paid for that and gave it and made it possible. [1:55:00]

And my mother was telling me today, last night, in the morning, that under Secretary Pierce in the HUD, they gave him the money for Abernathy Towers, six million dollars to build a home for senior citizens and handicapped people. And instead of keeping that for us, my dad gave it freely to the church, bought the land from the church, gave the church \$250,000, and then built a \$6 million building for the church. The profit all goes to West Hunter Street Baptist Church. Ralph David Abernathy was about giving. And there's not one Abernathy that sits on the board, none of us. We're not there.

But he wanted to give. He said to my mother in the hospital before he died, “I'm sorry, Juanita, I don't have any money to leave you.” He said, “My life was not about making money. My life was about helping people.” Because that's what filled his soul. And I'll never forget I was in Los Angeles the night he collapsed. And he called me early that afternoon and he said, “Donzaleigh, I want to thank you. I'm so proud of you,” and he laid out my life for me. And that night, he collapsed. When we got on a plane—Ralph

called me, and I got on a plane and I flew from Los Angeles to Atlanta and stayed with him and would stay with him all the way to the end, and fortunately—

RA: Well, we all did.

DA: We all did but—

RA: We took turns.

DA: We took turns.

RA: Every night. Daddy was never alone in his hospital. We took turns staying, spending the night, and the night that he died, that morning Donzaleigh—it was her watch.

DA: I was there.

RA: And she was there that night.

DA: I was there with him.

RA: But let me just close by saying this. In the Bible, if you believe in God, and if you believe that there is a God, and if you truly believe that his word withstands the test of time, and you believe that his word is in the Bible, it says in the Bible that he who is greatest among you will be servant of all. And that's who Ralph David Abernathy was.

DA: He was a servant.

RA: He was a servant of all.

DA: He wanted to serve the people. He wanted to make the world a better place. And we have to do our part. And that's what we try to do: to continue his work.

HJ: I think that's a great place and a great point at which to end this.

RA: Okay.

HJ: Thank you so much.

RA: Thank you.

DA: Thank you.

RA: God bless you.

[Recording ends at 1:57:59]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council