

Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
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Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2016

Interviewees: Raylawni G. Branch and Jeannette Smith

Interview Date: December 1, 2016

Location: Hattiesburg, Mississippi

Interviewer: Emilye Crosby

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: approximately 2 hours, 37 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Female 1: From the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

EMILYE CROSBY: My name is Emilye Crosby and I'm here this morning on December 1st, 2015, with Mrs. Jeannette Smith and Mrs. Raylawni Branch, and we're at the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, which has been helping with these interviews. And, this interview is part of the Civil Rights History Project, cosponsored by the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. So, good morning and welcome and thank you for being with us.

JEANNETTE SMITH: Good morning.

RAYLAWNI BRANCH: Thank you.

EC: I wonder if we could start, if you could each just say a little bit about when you were born, where you were born, and your family? I guess you're starting, Ms. Smith.

[Laughs]

JS: I was born in Jones County, Free State of Jones. I was born January the 1st, 1940, and basically I have property up there now, I have the family property, so my heritage is deep there. And, eventually I would like to move back to Soso. There's so many fond memories. I had wonderful parents. They really raised us right, under the circumstances, being a product of the Free State of Jones. Parents didn't teach us to hate anyone, and that was a good thing for me, especially going through the movement. I stayed in Jackson for a while, for two years, then I moved back to Soso, finished high school, and met my husband. I married him and moved here to Hattiesburg in 1959, January.

EC: You know, not everybody is going to know about the Free State of Jones. Can you tell us about that?

JS: Okay. Captain Newton Knight was able to meet my great-great-grandmother, Rachel. His grandfather had bought her as a slave. He fell in love with her, and he figured that he would just establish his own state. He didn't believe in segregation. He married her and he had a family by her. And, my grandfather was a product of that family. So, he wasn't successful in establishing his Free State of Jones, so he deserted the Confederacy and joined the Union.

RB: And he seceded from the Confederacy.

JS: Right. He seceded. And, there is a movie coming out about it. It's--Dr. Bynum was doing like you; she wrote a book on the Free State of Jones. And what that book does, it documents my people.

EC: So, in Mississippi, where we think of things as sort of black and white, right?

RB: It was never black and white.

JS: Never.

EC: And I think this area is one of the places that really shows some of the complexity of that.

RB: Yes.

JS: Right. It did. And then, that's one reason--because a mixture of the races--that's why black people have so much land; because they gave all their children that.

EC: And that's the land that's still in your family?

JS: That's the land that I have. But it comes from my mother's side, which is the same--my father's side, which is the same type of situation. My grandfather was Indian and white, and you know, there's just a mixture like that on both sides, biracial people.

EC: What kind of work did your family do? Your parents?

JS: My mother was a black nurse, and my father was a contractor, a carpenter. And he did farming; he had his own land. He was hired out, he built a lot of--some of the elegant homes there for the doctors and lawyers and people like that. He was independent.

EC: I want to come back and follow up, but Ms. Branch, could you tell us about when and where you were born, and your family?

RB: I was born the 1st of September, 1941. We're of the same age group. I was born here in Hattiesburg, 711 Whitney Street in my grandmother's house. It was a three-room shotgun [5:00] house, with outdoor privy. We had sidewalks, so--at that time you paid for them, if you wanted to get sidewalks in front of--

JS: You paid for them?

EC: Did you pay the city or did you pay somebody to put them in?

RB: You paid the city. You paid the city and they installed it. So, the street on which I was born had a church on the corner, Miss Emma Campbell, who--I don't know where Miss Emma came from--but Miss Emma was even lighter in skin color than Jeannette, and Mr. Kelly I think was some way tied up in that. There are several little communities around Hattiesburg where there were situations like Jeannette's parents, and they had children.

I was born here in Hattiesburg. I had one brother born here in Hattiesburg, even though they're ten of us, ten children. And I too, come from family out around Prentice, Mississippi, a little village called Mount Carmel, Mississippi. And we went back and looked at the books, and my great-grandparents actually bought their property, forty acres. Each one--they bought eighty acres. Nobody gave that forty acres and a mule. That never, never was a true thing. It might have been on the books, but it wasn't something that actually happened. But land was divided up in forty acres.

I lived between Hattiesburg and Mount Carmel. Went to school between Hattiesburg and Mount Carmel. And I'm a person who, I would say, I would beg to differ with you about

the civil rights history. There really--we are making history today, because civil rights is still a problem, worldwide.

EC: Yes, ma'am.

RB: And I don't believe in different races of mankind. We're all men. We're all mankind. We're not all men but we're all mankind. I would love to have it before I die, where people are like Jeannette and I. We were never taught to hate people, because when you went to a funeral, there were blonde and blue-eyed people there who were your closest of kin. So, you grew up with this in your head. And I really never knew a difference until the death of Emmett Till, and that--I was in Chicago at that time. I was a teenager. And up until then, just did not realize the hatred and hate.

I knew there were differing communities, but the lady who lived next to my great-grandmother, who was married to a gentleman who did not have much sense, I would say. He drank and he didn't take care of his family properly. He didn't farm properly. And she was what we call today white, Caucasian, of European extraction, poor white folks, some folks called them. Poor crackers, some people called them. But, she would come over and help my great-grandmother get food in and can, and peas shelled. So, my great-grandmother would give food and meat to her to take to feed the host of young'uns, as they say, that she had. Her husband was no good, but she would come and help my great-grandmother. So I grew up not really understanding because there were situations like that.

EC: Was that kind of interaction in community, was that the same in town as it was out in the country?

RB: I think in town, women of color worked in the big houses, in the houses, and it was--many times it was a reciprocal relationship. You were able to carry home the food that was left over, the clothes that were too little left over. When you wanted to buy a house, Miss Anne [10:00] could call the bank, or her husband could call the bank, and say, "Give so-and-so that loan for that house." So, there were--there were relationships, but the badness was there. It was there. I think the movie, *The Help*, tells the story better than anything I've ever seen, as far as the meanness.

EC: What kind of work did your parents do?

RB: My father was a farmer. He died when I was fourteen and he died in Chicago. He thought--he couldn't get a job. There were no jobs. You couldn't be hired out by someone. We--I can remember picking cotton, sitting on what they called a slide, pulled by a mule, from one field to another. And my mother was a housewife up until we went to Chicago.

In Chicago, my father worked--the first job he had was Tip Top Bakery, and I'm sure it was just scut work. My mother's first job, I remember, was at Brach Candy Company, and my mother was so fair, they hired her thinking she was white. And she didn't have better sense than to go sit and have lunch with the person, the one woman in the building, who was colored. She would go and sit and have lunch, and finally the supervisor said to her one day, "Why do you go sit with her and have lunch?" And, that n-word. And my mother said, "Because I'm one of those." And she was fired on the spot. And I would have kept the job if it helped feed my children, because we lived much better in Mississippi than we ever did in Chicago.

EC: Was that because you could raise your food, or what was the--?

RB: You had land, you could raise your food. You had relatives. You had family, and everybody in town was kin one way or the other.

EC: I was going to ask what it was like for you to move to Chicago from Mississippi.

RB: It wasn't that much different, as a child. There were very few children of European extraction in my classes. Very few. There were none here, except for all of those little high yellow ones like Miss Smith, or even their blonde, green-eyed cousins, but it wasn't much different. When we went to Oak Park outside of Chicago, or Winnetka, Illinois on the train--the school would take you on the school trip. You'd go on the L train and just ride so far and get off and come back. And you would see all these big, beautiful homes and communities. But you didn't internalize it as something against you, you just figured that your parents couldn't afford it. But we did own our home in Chicago. My daddy bought a home--in fact, he bought two. And he got sick. He had some type of blood dyscrasia, and my mother was pregnant, and we lost our home and we ended up in the barn, homeless. Furniture in the alley.

EC: What'd your family do?

RB: We lived in the park for a while. We were just homeless folks trying to find someplace to sleep at night, and that was usually one room and everybody piled into that one room. I would never take my children back to a city. Now, this is a city, but I'm now able to own and buy and sell, but I would not. People--I see people in, let's say, out of Africa and out of the Middle East, trying to get to Europe. [15:00] Some are getting there and finding

out the streets are not paved with gold, and it's better at home. Even if you had to mash the corn by hand, it's better at home.

EC: I want to come back to what you said about Emmett Till, but first I was wondering if you could both tell me some of the things that you learned in school and from your families that you think are important.

JS: Well, I grew up in a family of self-Seventh-Day Adventists. We had our own school. We were called the "white Negro," so you know, even though our relatives were dark, you had to fight racism within both races, and you had the terrorists; the Ku Klux Klan. It's just that, we were descendants of Newt Knight, so didn't nobody bother Newt, because he was known. He didn't take no stuff. You didn't bother his people. But, when my mother married my daddy, they called him Musgrove, them crazy Musgroves. He said, "My children are going to public school. We're not going to isolate them. They've got to live in the real world. They've got to live with their relatives. Some of them are dark, some of them are light. We didn't have anything to do with this, so what we're going to do, we're going to live within what's going on, you're going to accept what's going on. You're not going to have any hatred against people that's darker than you, and white people. You're going to live in the real world. You're going to love everybody.

My people were Christian people. They didn't believe in hatred and stuff like that, and if you--you know, open-minded and--. Our people had traveled, and I had never traveled that much--but I did--but I had relatives who had been everywhere and were very important people. And, you had struggles with terrorists that had been going on from the beginning of time. That's why--.

RB: We're used to terrorism.

JS: I'm just so appalled that they're making such an issue on these immigrants. It just, to me as a little girl, I always wondered, how can they come in here and take this country from the Indians, slaughter them and kill them, and it's their country? Then I found out in California they did the same thing. It's just people that conquered. And then, my mother would teach me to read the Bible. It was going on back then, same thing; brother against brother. There's sin in the world. That has nothing to do--. They don't even know why they're doing it.

So, then as a little girl, I have so many questions. Why would this man, knowing it was illegal, marry this--well, she was a mixed woman--marry her and try to establish his own country, and bring about children that are going to be faced with all this hatred among both races? You're not accepted anywhere.

So I remember going up the street--you see now, but I had them all the time, but I tinted. I tinted my hair just as soon as I could, and I learned because my mother--or, my first cousin had a beauty college right by Jackson State, so I learned how to cover it up. I thought to myself, I said, "A little pole cat. I'm just strict--. I'm just messed up." And then my mother would get on my case, "Why you asking all these questions?" I said, "Well Mama, I just want to know." She said, "We don't talk about that. We're trying to outlive that. I don't want you to go back in the past." You know? "You didn't have anything to do with being born. You're God's child." So I kept pounding on that; I'm God's child. I don't feel I have any feelings toward anyone, I get along with everyone. Those are just problems of the world. You've got terrorists all over the world, fighting over a little piece of land over there in Israel

that's not enough for anyone. Same thing all over the world. So, I know that--which my mother taught me--and as I get older I know this: I'm Jesus Christ's child, or whatever religion you believe in. My salvation is not of this world. [20:00] It's somewhere else.

EC: You know those questions you were asking and your sense of not belonging in either community? Do you remember sort of when and how you first had a sense of not belonging in either community? Or, how that happened to you? How you understood that?

JS: Well first of all, they questioned my eyes, you know? You can tell a person is biracial; they mostly got the green eyes. You know, they got those eyes. And, they called me--I was a devil's child. You know, I'd just been--.

EC: Was that at school?

JS: Well, up in Soso I lived exactly a mile from the school and I couldn't catch the bus because I didn't want to fight my relatives. I'd walk to school every morning. It was something about your hair. They'd pull your hair. They did--. "You're different." You know? And then I just wanted to be like everybody else.

RB: We're still being called different in Hattiesburg. [Laughs]

JS: You're right about that. So what I'm saying is, can I be just American? I want to be an American citizen. I don't want to be black or white. Ain't I an American? You know?

RB: Same thing here.

JS: Then you think about it within yourself, and then you've got to be very careful. You don't want to offend anybody. You can't be too outspoken because you're

offend someone, and I really don't want to do that, but it's very difficult when you're mixed. Very. Even when you're born, you know you're different.

RB: They called my mother "butter gal" because she was blonde and her--at the time, her stepfather was her stepfather [*sic*]. My grandmother was raped by the plantation owner, and when she found out she was pregnant, she ran off from--it's a little area out near Prentice called Friendship. And, she ran off to Hattiesburg. She worked enough to buy a house. They were selling houses from World War I off of Camp Shelby. Little shotgun houses they had down there. And they moved them from Camp Shelby up to Hattiesburg so there would be just lines of these shotgun--.

JS: Rows.

RB: Rows of shotgun houses, they'd stick them beside the railroad track, anywhere. She married--my grandmother married what they call a Cajun out of southern Louisiana.

EC: At that time, what did they--what made someone a Cajun?

RB: They were Frenchmen out of--originally out of Newfoundland, and you know, they loaded them down--shipped them down from Newfoundland to the Louisiana territory. And the Native Americans--and I don't know which nation--the Native Americans and Africans. And, they are still calling themselves Cajuns. They speak with a little accent. They live in those swamps. I'm not saying they're backwards or anything, it's just that they maintain that culture. And my mother's father--whom she called Father--she fit him. So, my grandmother made a decision never to have another child after he was killed on the railroad. He worked on the railroad in 1932. And that was a year when--I did a little research--when

there were many men of color who were killed on the railroad. Now, whether it was just purely accident or intentional, I don't know.

But, my mother was an only child, and my grandmother would put a bowl on top of her head and just cut her hair around like that and around the front, and she would deliver the butter that my grandmother would make, because my granddad had a cow and a pig that he'd keep down on the river, which was just a quarter mile away. So, for my mother, she would not talk about the fact of who she was and how she came about. It was a taboo subject. And I went looking for [25:00] a birth certificate for her, and the sad thing--I can't smile on this one--the sad thing is that she lived until she was sixty-seven and she never knew her real name. On the birth certificate it says Christine Halloway. They mixed my grandmother's name--which was [Fannie May?] Holloway--they took the O--mistook the O and made it an A or just didn't care or whatever. So, she was born and died and never knew her name, but her name that we knew was Alfonsia Elsie, after her daddy out of Louisiana. And when we looked up Frank Elsie, she was the only child listed under him, even though he had been married before. And I don't know if there was a divorce or anything like that. It was very hard for my mother. She was like your family. She was ostracized on both sides. If you had one drop--one thirty-second?

JS: One sixteenth.

RB: One sixteenth of what they called black blood, you were black. So, you could be blonde and you could be blue-eyed, but if there was--as Mr. Carter would say, "One in the woodpile"--then you were that. For me, I was dark enough--. The only people who mistakes me are the--some people from Thailand, or some of the Hawaiian Islands, Fijians, Koreans.

There are some dark-skinned Koreans, and I get mistaken, especially by the men, if I'm walking on the street. And I lived--. I went to school part time in New York City and I found that those kinds of people would talk to me in their language, and I would say, "I'm sorry. I don't understand what you're saying." It was probably good I didn't understand. But I know that many people--. And I straightened my hair at that time. I don't straighten my hair anymore. I just got to where I said, "I have to love me no matter what." And I love me all over. I still own the property that my grandmother inherited. So, my daddy's dead and it came to us children, and we've maintained it. In fact, I have a daughter who's retiring next year and I gave twelve acres to her and she's going to build a house on her twelve acres.

JS: Well ain't that something.

RB: And she's going back to the country like you.

JS: I love it.

EC: Does anybody farm your land or is it timber?

RB: No, it's timber. It's timber. But, it's beautiful land, and I'm sure if you put some--. My great-grandmother used to have her garden closest to the house, and then there were fields of corn and cotton and all kinds of vegetables. A smoke house. And once a year people would get together--once or twice a year--the women would get together and do all the canning, and the men would get together in the fall and make syrup and smoke meat and the women would make sausage. So, it was more community than what you have in a city. You didn't have that--well, yes you did. You had those, my uncle and aunt who had a store, but his daddy--.

JS: Ancestors.

RB: His daddy was colonel--I mean, Colonel Hall. Colonel Robert Hall and my uncle Rohan were first cousins. So, him being green-eyed and very fair and blonde, they--he not only had the store in our little village, he was even allowed to sell guns and ammunition, which was a law. Blacks could not own hardwares so they could--because they could get guns and ammunition, [30:00] but he was allowed because he was who he was.

EC: That's interesting.

RB: That family, Aunt Ella May married one of my uncles on my daddy's side, and Aunt Elemay was blonde and blue-eyed when she died, and she was in her late sixties.

So, we're just humans, and you can't afford to hate anyone, because then you hate yourself. And I usually don't use, you know, "black" and "white." Everyone here at the university knows I don't. And I think some people do things out of guilt, because I know that plaza--. Have you seen that plaza?

EC: Hm-mm.

RB: There's a plaza on campus. It has Armstrong-Branch Plaza. It's two blocks long. It's wide. It has seats on both sides. International Building is on it, because I had made a comment that I would love to have the International Building on the plaza. It was put on the plaza. So, I don't think they could do anything else for us. For twenty--. What, [19]93 they started, the Armstrong-Branch Lecture Series. So, you've gotten watches and all kinds of pictures and things, and dinners, but I would rather them use the money for scholarships and not things. Because you can blow down a building, and we've had some buildings blown down on this campus. I mean, nobody--. I don't think a tornado had ever

been through her before it was built, but the school was built over a hundred years ago. But a tornado came through and really--.

EC: Recently?

RB: Yes.

EC: I remember, yes.

RB: Yes, it was recent. It was 2013; February 10th, 2013.

EC: I actually remember. I was in New York but I remember, because it's home.

RB: Now, this is home for you?

EC: Claiborne County.

JS: Really?

RB: Okay, so you're a Mississippian. That's right. You did tell that to me.

EC: I was raised here. Came when I was eight.

RB: Okay.

EC: We haven't talked yet about the fact that you were one of the first students to integrate the University of Southern Mississippi, so I wanted to give that context for what you were talking about with the Branch Plaza and the lecture series. We can--.

RB: Without people like her husband and her and the things they did during the late [19]50s, early [19]60s, people like Mr. Vernon Dahmer, the Bournes. There are just so many people who helped me, helped us. Elaine Armstrong. Gwendolyn Elaine Armstrong. That's her name. Gwendolyn is six years younger than me. She graduated from the same high school I did, Rowan, which was the colored high school. She wanted to go to school at home. She wanted to stay at home because her mother was handicapped and she felt it was

best for her to not go off to Alcorn or Jackson State. And since Ole Miss had integrated-- quote-unquote; integration never really came about--they had to be the first school--. The politics behind it, they had to be the first one, and poor James Meredith really caught hell doing that. And people died and people were injured, and the devil showed its face on that campus.

By the time we came here in [19]65, we didn't have any problems at all. I think I got called a nigger one time, and the ballfield at that time was where the business school is, out on the highway there, off the service road. That's where we went and had gym. I'll never forget the first time I went into the gym building to change clothes. I was putting on my shorts [35:00] and there was a big mirror. When I came up I could see these girls standing behind me in the mirror. They were watching for my tail. Because, some people actually thought we had tails, and I guess they had been reared up with that lie. And, I just smiled. You don't pick a fight over something so silly. They could see I had no tail. Maybe they thought I cut it off. I don't know. But, they alphabetized us in class, so I was always one of the last ones. If you look in the yearbook, you'll see. I'm on almost the last page there; there were a few people maybe who had come out of Europe or had Zs or Vs or--you know. I was a Y. So, there might have been some Zs after me. But in the classroom, I was usually the last student. Most instructors just ignored us. We were just there. Elaine and I never really had a class together. She was an A, Armstrong. So she was usually up front in the class and I was in the back. And, if you look at the yearbook, you can see; they made us all the same color. I mean, you can't find us by color.

EC: You can't.

RB: No, not at all. The gentleman who was our advisor was Dr. Geoffrey Fish. He was in the science department. And Dr. Fish, in a meeting with Dr. McCain who was the president, and he had been told, if he allowed anyone to come here, they would shut down the school. The governor, who was Ross Barnett at that time, said they would close down the school.

EC: I should say that we're actually in the McCain Library here.

RB: Yes, we are actually --.

EC: And this is the--this is President McCain you're speaking about.

RB: This is President McCain. He lived in what we called the Ogletree House. The Ogletrees gave a lot of money. I mean, that's the only way you get something, of course, with your name on it, out here. Except my case. The department of transportation, King, who was Senator King, at the time, signed off on over a million dollars to put in this plaza. I say, I think they did it out of guilt, but it doesn't matter; it establishes the fact that we were here, and there are bronze plaques in the ground on both the ends.

But, Dr. McCain had stated that he could not let anyone come, and that's why he didn't let Clyde Kennard come. And what happened to Clyde was criminal, and everyone involved should have gone to jail. But at that time, you could just walk up to someone and shoot them. You weren't going to jail. You weren't even going to--. I mean, if they had a trial it was a mockery.

EC: I know you said you don't like to use "black" and "white," but what you're talking about here, right, is if a white person killed a black person?

RB: Yes. There's a video of the guy and they showed it right in that video, it was one of those *Eyes on the Prize*, where this guy walks up in McComb, Mississippi, white, and just shot point blank, a black guy who was going in to register to vote.

EC: That was, I think, State Representative E.W. Hurst, killed Herbert Lee.

RB: Yes, and they weren't--I don't think anything--. I don't even think they had a trial.

EC: They had a coroner's jury, that day.

RB: Yes, but no real criminal indictment and taken to court.

EC: No. That's true. That's right.

RB: But he was told that USM--. It wasn't USM, but Mississippi Southern College and then went to University, and what they--. Clyde was a person who believed in the goodness of mankind.

JS: He sure did.

EC: Do you know the story from when it was happening, or do you know the --.

RB: Oh yes, I know his story.

EC: So you knew him?

RB: I knew him personally. I worked where [40:00] he brought eggs. Not every day, he would bring in flats of eggs, crates of eggs. I worked in a little restaurant on Mobile Street. And the day he came in--. There were several gentlemen. They would meet at Smith Drug Store. The leaders. And, they tried to talk him out of coming out here. Each time--that last time he came, he came alone.

EC: Is that the black leadership?

RB: Yes. They tried to talk him out of it. Now, there were conversations behind the scenes with Dr. McCain, Mr. N.R. Berger, who was the black principal, if I have to identify people black or white, who was the black principal over at Rowan. He and Mr. Roy, who was a principal at Eureka [School], wasn't he?

JS: Right.

RB: They wanted a black junior college put here in Hattiesburg. So, in a way, they were sellouts, to me. And of course, they're family. I graduated with one of Mr. Berger's sons. And I know they loved their dad, they loved their mom, but to me they were sellouts. We needed access. This was a state run school with state taxes. We needed to be able to go here just like everyone else.

EC: And so they tried to talk Mr. Kennard out of coming.

RB: From coming, out here alone.

EC: So that they could make the junior college?

RB: Oh yes, oh yes. They talked to Clyde several times. I think it's documented in the Sovereignty Commission. It's certainly documented in some of the other papers. So, Dr. McCain played the politics, allowed Ole Miss to be the first one, with James Meredith, and since we were girls--girls--Dr. Lucas calls us angels, but Dr. McCain had a few other choice words, I'm sure, because he belonged to the John Birch Society.

JS: Right.

RB: And, that's just the same as the Klan. So, when we came to campus, I give all credit to Clyde. I mean, that was in the late [19]50s. We came mid-[19]60s. And the good people who would supply food to me and helped us and paid tuition and stuff like that.

Elaine and I both come from poverty, and there were many days we'd walk back and forth from the other side of town to here.

EC: I want to follow up on some of what you said, but Miss Smith, you nodded your head, too. Did you know Mr. Kennard?

JS: I sure did. I knew him in a different way. I knew of him when he was arrested and he was in the jail and he was sick. At that time they had Dr. Willis Walker, a white doctor, and the Moin (?) brothers, who were very instrumental in the NAACP, and sent in her, and the other young lady --.

RB: To school.

JS: To Southern. And the two young ladies --.

RB: William Carey [University].

JS: William Carey, and my son, integrated to public schools. I knew him because Mr. Bourne then wanted him to see one of our--a physician, which was my husband. He checked him, and examined him, and explained to them that he needed a work-up.

EC: This was when he was at Parchman?

JS: This was when he was in the Forrest County Jail.

EC: In Forrest County Jail?

JS: That's when I first met him, Forrest County Jail. They later, I think, they still sent him on to Parchman. They later, when they did check him out, it was too late; he had cancer.

EC: So you think he already had it when he was here?

JS: He had it then. He had the symptoms, but he knew that he had to work him up. They could have sent him to the medical center up at Jackson, but --.

RB: They gave him hard labor.

JS: They did. They just did him so wrong. But, we tried to keep up with him, but you know what? That was his mission. That was his mission. God had to free his people and the way I see it, [45:00] those things that happened to me, putting me where the moment was happening, when I first met Raylawni, I met Raylawni at an NAACP meeting in 1959. So, she was the little secretary. So we had to go up those stairs down on Mobile Street. And a lot of people say, "Oh, she didn't live here. She wasn't here." But that's not true. I've always known her being a fighter. Being a fighter that'll stand up by herself. She don't need a crowd. You know, so God has put some of us on this Earth as a mission. We have to thank Clyde Kennard for his vision.

EC: Not everybody is going to know about Mr. Kennard, so can you explain the backstory, like what happened with him?

RB: There's some I can tell you and some I can't.

JS: I can tell you something.

RB: [Laughs] He lived outside--on the north side of Hattiesburg in a small community called Macedonia? Or is that Kelly Settlement?

JS: Kelly Settlement.

RB: Kelly Settlement, okay.

JS: By the airport. Out there by the airport.

RB: Yes, between here and the airport.

EC: So you were going to tell us about Mr. Kennard.

RB: Mr. Kennard had come to Hattiesburg to help his mother. His father died, and they had a chicken farm. They raised biddies, small, baby chickens, up to a certain size, and then they went off to the feed stores and, depending on the size when they got bought and by whom. And he had come out here a total of three times, but when he started and the conversations were going on between McCain, the governor --. It might have been Johnson all the way back then when they started, Governor Johnson.

EC: Was it Governor Coleman?

RB: I don't think it was Coleman.

EC: In the [19]50s?

JS: It was just before Ross Barnett, though.

EC: I think it might have been Governor Coleman, then Ross Barnett, then Johnson.

RB: Okay. Well, whichever one it was, there were conversations going on, and I-- as I said--I knew Clyde because he brought eggs into what we called Fat's Kitchen. It was one of the restaurants right next to Smith Drug Store. Yes, it was Smith in the beginning, Smith Drug Store. And, over the years--. I graduated in [19]59. That was the year. And, I think his--. Was that the last year he came out here? Whatever the last year it was that he came out here.

JS: Fifty-nine.

RB: And he came alone, and they arrested him. Eventually it was--. At one time it was whiskey in the car, at one time it was something else, and then it was, he stole chicken

feed. Now, the story about the chicken feed. A friend of his worked at one of the feed stores and the chicken feed came in hundred pound bags. So, sometimes the bags on the bottom would get damp, and they wouldn't sell that. They would throw it out, so he would sweep it up and they would rebag it.

EC: Mr. Kennard's friend?

RB: Friend. Mr. Kennard didn't work there; Mr. Kennard worked on his farm and sold eggs and chickens I guess, sometimes. The young man--. The man at the time, he wasn't--. He's my age. We were the same age. Robert [Johnny Lee Roberts]. Robert, Robert, Robert.

JS: I can't recall his last name.

RB: I'll think of it.

EC: We can put it in.

RB: Anyway, he would get five--. By the time he would gather together five hundred pounds, five bags, he would take it to Clyde, because all the chicken feed places, all the feed houses, refused to sell chicken feed to him. They figured that would run him out of business.

EC: That's because he was trying to go to Southern.

RB: Because he was trying to go to Southern. So they were doing--you know, pressuring him. And then he was arrested and it was just--. It was very devastating for me [50:00] to see what was supposed to be the law, do such a terrible thing. And, Mr. J.C. Fairley and I tried --. We didn't try, we did. Mr. Fairley got in touch with Dick Gregory and Charles Evers, who was in Chicago. Charles Evers was Medgar's brother, Medgar Evers's

brother, who was killed in Jackson, Mississippi. They met us at the airport in Jackson on a private plane that was paid for by Dick Gregory. And we talked Mr. Roberts--was his last name Roberts? Anyway, we talked him into going and telling the truth, because if you look at the court case, it's a comedy. "Mr. Roberts, did you say that Clyde told you to steal that chicken feed?" "Yessir. Yessir, he did." He was nineteen, he was very frightened, scared to death of white folks, and just said whatever that lawyer said to say, he said. And he got seven years. Now, there's some things I had to leave out of that. But, he is still living. He goes to Shady Grove Baptist Church. And, Jerry Mitchell, out of Jackson with the Clarion Ledger, and I got together--and he'll tell you if you email him--and brought the man to my house, and he told us that story. So, there was never any stealing involved. They still say Clyde Kennard went to jail for stealing. He didn't. He went to jail because he tried to come to Southern.

EC: You mentioned Mr. Fairley?

RB: Mr. J.C. Fairley.

EC: Yes. And he was president of the NAACP then? Is that what--?

JS: Yes, at that time.

RB: At that time, yes. Mr. Dahmer was before Mr. Fairley.

EC: Miss Smith, did you have parts you wanted to add about Mr. Kennard? How you knew him and--?

JS: Well, I think, I guess. We just--. I knew him because the NAACP was helping him.

RB: Oh yes.

JS: And that's who was with the backbone of everything, integrating of public accommodations, voting and everything. The reason that you had the summer of [19]64, because Hattiesburg was like a mecca of people that-- You had a group of men in the 1950s had filed a suit to get the right to register to vote. In the [19]50s, you had a group that had always fought for their rights, and we've had a branch--NAACP branch here since 1946. So, the people came because it was safe. That's why you had so many people to come down. And sometimes it's said-- I'll never forget this little judge from Pennsylvania had said, "If it's not local, it's not real." See, we were not writers. We didn't come down here representing churches, organizations. We weren't documenting any history. We were just doing it because we wanted our rights. In fact, I have a kind of feeling about that. You know, for people to come in to profit from what the people did. A lot of times they don't even get recognition for it, and it's kind of a sad thing because the local people haven't gotten recognition. They could have lost their lives. They burned churches, homes, ran them out of town. Like, they threatened us. They were terrorists, you know? They threatened many people. And they lived through that. They didn't, after two weeks or three weeks, they didn't go back home.

And then, I'm a traveler, so this friend of mine who's a journalist who stayed with me, I went to visit her in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The first thing I want to know, what kind of community. She lived in a gated community, [55:00] no integrated churches, no integrated schools. But she was down here fighting our cause and she needed to be home fighting her cause. You know, so it just bothered me the double standards. So it stuck with me; if it's not local, it's not real. If I see act of, you know, segregation right now or double

standards, I want to attack it. I want to get rid of it, because it shouldn't be. We are in America.

You know, and I don't have any problems being black. I appreciate the black culture. They made me what I am, you know? They made me strong, not bitter. I want to get rid of the problem. I want to be like everybody else. I taught my children that. Everybody around me, I want them to be that. The black people accepted me because I'm, unlike her, I have four cultures in me; Indian, I have white, black, Spanish. You know, and I'm one-fourth of each one of those. So I was up there in--gambling in the casinos, and somebody told me that I could get me--they had some money up there for me, and all I had to do--.

RB: At the Choctaw.

JS: Yes. I could get some because I--.

RB: Five percent. If you're five percent.

JS: But I'm one-fourth.

RB: Oh gosh, yes.

JS: So I said, oh my goodness.

RB: But you have to go up there to apply.

JS: That's what they told me.

RB: Yes, the chief says.

JS: I talked to the chief before they got the lady chief, and then I thought about that. I said, "You know, I'm not trying to profit off of that. I just want everybody to be treated equal." We have equal rights. We are the only race that came here against our wishes as slaves. I don't want--. I don't want to be bitter about that. Those people were

trying to make money, and their folks who had them on the ship, they cleaned them up and they started integration on the ship. How could you have such double standards? How could you hate people and you have sex with them and families by them? How could you do that? How could you own them behind the scenes, and when you get with someone else, you can't own them? But living through that, and when we got us a--. And I'm so proud--. He called himself a black president, because of black people.

RB: When did he do that?

JS: He's the black president. Obama? He's a black president. He aligned himself with the black race.

RB: Oh, oh. You mean--. Okay.

JS: Obama.

RB: He had no choice. [Laughs] If he'd of--.

JS: Yes, but he did, though.

RB: Yes, he did.

JS: You have to admire his--.

RB: He's as much one--. He's as much one as the other.

JS: Let me tell you what I admire. No matter what they do to him, he doesn't come out with bitterness. He comes out giving them a lesson. And some of the times what they do to him, I want to go in my self-defense mode. I want to go in there and defend him, do something to them. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.

RB: [Laughs]

EC: That's that aggressive self-defense, right? [Laughs]

JS: Disrespecting our president. But for once, Raylawni, we have a--. We have a man in there that represents us. So, in America, everybody's represented. We have a biracial president.

RB: And it's certainly not the color issue.

JS: It's not.

RB: Because Dr. Carter--. Is it Carter?

JS: Yes.

RB: I wouldn't vote for Dr. Carter [Ben Carson] if he was running for dog catcher.

JS: But he's a good surgeon.

RB: But he doesn't even do that anymore. So, you can't call him a good surgeon anymore. He might have been a good surgeon.

EC: Can I circle back, Ms. Branch?

RB: Circle.

EC: When you mentioned Charles Evers and Dick Gregory and bringing the plane to Jackson, was that when Mr. Kennard was released at the very end to go to his sister's?

JS: The work-up.

RB: No. We were trying to get the boy who was the state witness--.

EC: To tell the truth?

RB: To tell the truth. And he was so afraid. We did get him to Chicago. And they took him out to dinner and he said they had--. They put this big steak in front of him, but there was a white woman sitting next to him. He couldn't eat the steak. He said, "I couldn't I couldn't swallow with this white woman sitting next to me." [1:00:00] And he left the

group with the excuse he had to go to the bathroom or something, and left the group and three--and found his way back to Hattiesburg.

EC: So he was just really afraid.

RB: He was scared to death. And all these years, he still--. We have a Clyde Kennard Day here on campus, we have a Clyde Kennard Day at Mary Magdalene Church where he is buried, and he goes to Shady Grove, where--. There's some very strong people that's come out of Shady Grove. Mr. Dahmer was one of them. He's never, never talked about it. Now, is that out of fear still, or is that out of shame that he didn't stand up like a man? I would have probably been dead.

I think I was born, as you say, with a mission. I quit school and got the principal fired when I was four and a half in Mount Carmel, Mississippi, because he hit me, four times, along with three other students, for going in the book house, and we didn't go in the book house. And I kept telling him, "We weren't the ones that went in the book house. It was those other children that ran when you came." But he called the assembly and whipped four of us little tots. Pre-primer, they called it. Pre-primer, where you read "Wee Willy Winkle." I was reading at four and a half, so they said, "Let her go to school." So I went to school. And he whipped me, and when I got my four licks, I walked down those little three steps off the stage and just kept walking, and he's screaming, "Young lady come back here and sit down!" and I turned around and I said, "I'm going home and tell my daddy." And they called a meeting at the church that night and he was fired, because he was wrong. I don't care what your color; if you're wrong, you're wrong.

EC: So I guess that must have been an early lesson for you. I mean, you stood up for yourself and then you got backed up.

RB: I've always stood up for yourself. My great-grandmother, who--on my daddy's side--told this story. She had two boys who were Pullman porters. They fought with Philip --.

EC: Randolph?

RB: Randolph. Philip A. Randolph, I think it is?

EC: A. Philip Randolph. She would get a pass--. The family would get a pass, and she would go somewhere different--California, Washington State--every year, following the Federated Women's Club. And they would have a national convention. And she was one of those who could afford to go because she had the pass. And, she said this conductor was taking her ticket and called her auntie. And she said she turned and looked at him and said, "You know, I don't know you. I don't know your mother and I don't know your father. I'm not sister to either one of them. So how am I your auntie?" So, I come up--. There was a shotgun at the door. It wasn't the shotgun you hunted for food, and nobody was to come through that door after your family.

EC: Did you learn to shoot?

RB: I learned to shoot. Oh yes. I learned to shoot.

EC: Both of you?

JS: Oh yes. You can't live in the country--.

RB: And not know how to shoot. My mother hunted. And yet, I'm a person against guns. I've learned, the NRA is a shameful part of America.

JS: I love guns.

RB: I don't--. There's one in our house but it's an antique. I wouldn't shoot it; it'd probably shoot me. [Laughter]

JS: I believe in self-defense. You know, some things, you know, in--. I understand my mission. I understand people who have been inflicted with fear. It's ingrained in them. So in forgiving people, you've got to understand, we were blessed to have been born with a mission. Most people don't have it. That's why I'm very forgiving. See, you didn't ask to be born white. I didn't ask to be born mixed. But we're God's children. I don't want to blame anyone for what somebody else's sins were during that day. If we're going to get along, we're going to have to learn to [1:05:00] work with everyone, because the masses of the people are not like us. They need us to help them, and I want to help them. That's why, in our home up there--my niece stays right next door to me--there's a gun in that room for the four-legged things like them deer taking over their farm, and the two-legged ones, too, because you never know what people are up to. And then when you're down in those woods--and we live in a way that's very private--you don't know who else is coming from the back of the woods. So they know that we defend ourselves.

RB: Yes.

JS: So, unlike most people, I like guns. I'm not going to have a gun on my--. I don't have a pickup truck, but I don't want to put it on my rack. I don't want to do that. But I have it for a purpose; I think you have a right to defend yourself, because if you didn't, I wouldn't be living today. You know, people know that we believe, we have guns, we will defend our property.

EC: Was your house ever shot at in the movement?

JS: Yes, 1968.

RB: There was so much going on prior to 1964. I left here in [19]66. Mr. Dahmer died January 10, [19]66. I finished school here in [19]66 and got a scholarship to St. John's Episcopal School of Nursing, in New York City. But before 1964, we had, god, the hotel downtown, Forrest Hotel, we had had-- Judge [Patrick] Higginbotham was the speaker.

JS: He was.

RB: We had integrated that. We had gone to a hotel for lunch or breakfast or something, out here on Forty-Nine, and I was stealth. Now, you know the word *stealth*. You're doing things, but you're hiding as you do it. I was the first person hired at the telephone company. They put me on nights and I had no one to keep my children at night. My husband was mentally ill and not with me anymore, and I couldn't take a job where I had no one to take care of my children. So I told them I couldn't take it, but I had made that first step, which meant other people made--stepped up.

JS: They came with you.

RB: Joyce Bourne Brown, who is now Yarborough, stepped up and went and got a job, and that was her job her whole life. She worked at the telephone company. I was the first one hired by Sears. Now, this was with the knowing of the NAACP. Somebody had to know where you were. So, we knew that there was someone in the group that would tell everything, so there was just maybe four or five of us who would plan to do things. And there was a place for everyone. Many of the people who did things are dead and gone, will never get any recognition. The first clerk hired at Sears.

They put me in shipping and receiving so nobody had to look at me, but one day the candy girl didn't come in. I don't know if you remember Sears and they had the little candy shop, the little candy place in the middle of the store? The candy girl didn't come in. So, the cleanup lady was asked and she worked at Sears out here after they moved it to the mall, she retired from there. They asked her, "Do you think you can sell candy?"

So I had made a step and--which opened up a place for other people. I was the first one hired by Big Yank, which made--.

JS: Clothes. Jeans.

RB: Jeans and shirts. Work clothes. And we went to the permanent press. They had four hundred women working, sewing, cutting and sewing. They refused to work with blacks. I bugged them down at the unemployment office to the point of climbing across the man's desk [1:10:00] and getting right up in his face. "I know there's a job up in here somewhere for me, other than Miss Anne's kitchen or working in a restaurant." And when you worked in a restaurant, you couldn't even work out where the tables were. If you did, you only bussed tables and you had to do that with gloves, white gloves.

They gave the federal book to me, and that's what woke me up to the fact that I need some more education. I had a high school diploma, but that was all. And I had had three babies. So, when I went to Big Yank, they finally hired me and they sent me back and forth. I'm walking. I don't have a car. There's no buses going back from Big Yank over to Walnut Street where the unemployment office was. They finally hired me, and the floor walker said--my supervisor said, "Go out and find yourself three other gals to work with you, because we're going to have to put you on evenings. The other ladies won't work with you." Four

hundred of them. Well, my plan--. I did. Went out and got three others. They ran a whole shift with a floor walker, a supervisor, and they had one gentleman who ran this heating machine that the clothes went through to become permanent press. And we got in this--. And we went and joined the Amalgamated Clothing Union, which was right down the street. It's a Korean church right now.

We had this competition going. We will press everything you sew. And there was a big chute coming from upstairs down, and we'd walk in and we'd see all these shirts in bundles of twenty-five, fifty, whatever they were. They couldn't sew enough shirts during the day. Well, we learned how to run those machine-. And the floor walker had told me, "You're machinist number one, but you're too short to run that machine." And I started looking around and said, "You have a little box?" Stepped up on that little box. We got used to doing what we had to do to those shirts. I was the first one to handle them. I pressed the body and then the collars and the shirts, and the last, fourth girl pinned them with the paper that they put in, the cardboard.

We got so good. The rule under the union was, if you finished your piece work before the eight hours you could still get paid for eight hours but leave. They couldn't sew enough shirts to keep us there more than six hours.

EC: You must have loved that.

RB: And we'd strut out at eleven o'clock at night, and I'd walk home. And I walked in the shadows because you didn't want to be out in the light where somebody could shoot you, because they definitely would.

EC: You mentioned that when Emmett Till was murdered, that that really was shock--. It was your first exposure, I guess?

RB: It tipped me that I was different, and that Mississippi and other places, even Chicago, was a place that maybe you should be afraid, and that people hated you. I had gone to a church with my mother, and there was a table similar to this and we were sitting over here, and a little boy about four or five years old, maybe, he'd crawl underneath and he'd get right there, and he'd look up at me and say, "Nigger. Nigger." Now, I know the other women, who were all white besides me and my mother, at that table, heard that child. They never said a word to him.

EC: Was that in Chicago?

RB: That was in Chicago. And, I was in Chicago. I picked up *Jet* magazine and it wasn't on the front cover, was it? Was it the mid, the center fold? Whichever one it was, he was in the casket. And it frightened me so much, I threw the--threw down the magazine, the *Jet* magazine, and ran out of the store. And ran all the way home. And I said, "Mama, they killed a boy in Mississippi." For Mama, it was a--it wasn't that it wasn't news. [1:15:00] She wasn't affected, but it set me--. It affected me so much, it said--. And Mama had always said, "If they did anything to one of my boys or my husband, I would get jobs at nursing homes and hospitals and I would poison up a lot of people." So, my family--. I'd grown up when I was in the country, with the shotgun sitting there. You protected your family. My mother had always said, "They better not do anything to one of my boys." And to see this child having that done, because I always said, "You wouldn't take my grandchild out of my house. They'd have had to take me that night." But they lied or maybe the family was

afraid, the grandparents, or whatever it was. But they wouldn't have gotten one of my brothers out of the house unless they'd have killed everyone in the house. We had done many, many things. Her husband built a clinic here in Hattiesburg. The building is still there. He built the clinic because he was a black doctor and the hospital--Forrest General Hospital, in--. It was called Methodist Hospital. It's now Merit Wesley out on 98. They would--. If he had a client that needed to go into the hospital he had to turn them over to a white doctor. That's how bad it was. When I--. All three of my babies were born at Forrest General. I don't know about yours.

JS: Just one.

RB: Just one.

JS: Mm-hmm.

RB: The charity hospital was up in Laurel, and it was in the basement. You had to walk through the furnace room and the laundry stuff to get to where the colored folks were, and you could have TB, gunshot, babies born. Everything was down there in that dark, dingy basement with no light. Forrest General, there was a floor. It's now a hallway on the way--. It's now a hallway on the backside of the cafeteria. Everyone was put there. Because my mother was who she was--. Now, let's see. Felts, who was a white doctor at Hattiesburg Clinic, was out physician, and he would give us a five o'clock appointment so we didn't have to go in that little back room and sit and wait until they saw all the white patients.

EC: You said because your mother was who she was. Can you explain?

RB: Being a white father and a black mother.

EC: So the doctor was willing to give her a little privilege because of that?

RB: We got privileges. Now, Bill Thacker, Dr. Thacker, was our dentist. His house is on the corner of Broadway and what's that side street? It's right across from where the Catholic high school is right now.

JS: Southern.

RB: Big brick fence around that house, and Bill Thacker, his wife, goes to the-- went to the church until she died, where I go now. And I asked Bill. I said, "Bill, why did you all put that big brick wall around your house?" They had two girls, and the Klan had threatened them; they were going to kidnap those girls and kill them because he took black patients. We had been terrorized for as long as we've been here. We have been fighting this fight for as long as we've been here. It goes on today.

EC: Can you--. You said that your mother always said that if anybody did anything to her sons or--.

RB: Or her husband.

EC: Or her husband. Was she--.

RB: She was going to get revenge.

JS: She believed in self-defense.

RB: Self-defense.

EC: She was more worried about the males in the family?

RB: Oh, women, we couldn't go into a restaurant and go to the bathroom or anything like that, downtown here. You couldn't go to a hotel. But, you could get a job when your man couldn't. It was different. [1:20:00]

EC: Can you explain that for people that didn't experience it?

RB: Oh, gosh.

EC: You know what I'm asking?

RB: Like your daddy; he worked the farm or hired out to work for somebody white. My daddy wasn't a carpenter. When he went into the navy, he was one of those Mississippians who not only could read, but write, and he had beautiful handwriting. So, he was trained to be a teacher in the service, an instructor they called it, in service. And they only sit people that could boost their numbers, because most whites out of Mississippi at that time--and it's well documented--could not read or write.

EC: And the military was having trouble, right? Because people weren't educated enough?

RB: Oh yes, that weren't educated enough.

EC: Is this what that was about? Was trying to--.

RB: And do you know we're back to that now? Especially out of the state of Mississippi? They have a problem recruiting because there's so many people who can't-- young men who can't read or write? They might have finished school or got a GED. There are two types of GEDs. I didn't realize that. There's just one where you attend. You get a certificate of attendance. And one where you get a high school diploma.

EC: That's a new development, isn't it?

JS: It's been there all the time.

EC: Really?

RB: We just didn't know it.

EC: Okay, because I--yes, I only learned about that recently.

JS: But see, their funds end when they're a certain age. Maybe eighteen? I think twenty. They might go up to twenty. They've got to get them out of school, so they just pass them whether they really passed or not, and then they put them in vocational school. That's the whole idea.

RB: But you have to read to get even into a vocation.

JS: Well, they have a system, moving them on and getting that money.

RB: At one time, but now many companies cannot get workers who can read and who can write. And yes, they--. It's like jail; jail has become a business.

JS: Right.

RB: As Jeannette stated, long before the students and the Freedom Riders came to town or came to Mississippi and the South, we were fighting. And were very successful.

EC: I was wondering if you all could tell me about the early NAACP, because you were both involved with it, right?

JS: She went on to nursing school. We were very active on all levels, because we're so active, we're the largest member in the state. Life members, and in my resume, that's what I dealt with. And I touched on that. So, because of our activities, and we were known, Forrest County was a fighting county. That's why everybody came here. And like I was saying, it's just amazing how they came here. And some of the stories and books that are written should be the stories of the people they stayed with.

EC: Yes, ma'am.

JS: You know, that's a shame that they didn't even give them credit for it, as if they just came here, didn't speak to someone or nothing--. Bothered me more than anything

else. They had funds to help them. They never gave them anything on groceries. You know, just--. You know, it was just a transfer like they were going to Africa to help the Africans, but when you came home, you didn't really help them because you were eating their food. I know when I fed them, you know, and then that was when we had the kitchen down on Mobile Street. Miss Campbell, Miss Fairley, and her sister, Miss Bourne, and myself, I was down there trying to cook. That's how I learned to cook.

RB: Miss Pinky Hall and her sister.

JS: Pinky Hall.

EC: So, was this during the summer, so you all had a--.

JS: This was before.

RB: This was before.

EC: Was this when the ministers were coming in?

RB: From [19]62. The ministry started in--.

JS: Sixty-one.

RB: Sixty-one. That's right. You're right.

EC: So, you all--. So that was like cooking for the voter registration?

JS: For the workers. They were hungry, you know, because we knew that the people, if they housed them and to keep them safe and nobody bomb their house, they probably--. Crops could have been destroyed. They could have lost a lot of things by just helping those civil rights workers. [1:25:00] So, we had to organize in the community. You had--. The churches were so wonderful. You had summer school, vacation Bible school,

and they were cooking at the church. So, what we did, the churches gave us food that we began to cook over there on Mobile Street, to feed the workers.

EC: So you're saying "we" and "we organized," right?

JS: Yes.

EC: Can you--.

JS: "We" being the ACP.

EC: Okay, so the NAACP?

RB: Even though we married and became COFO, the NAACP led.

EC: Can I ask, when did you all first learn about the NAACP? Do you remember?

JS: I've known about it all my life.

EC: You did? Was your family members?

JS: They were not members.

RB: Mine were.

JS: Because we lived in the country. They didn't have a branch out there. But then Laurel had a branch, Dr. Murph. We just never joined. But we supported. We gave them money. You know, we always--. When they did the fund drive, we always gave them money.

EC: Was that true for your family too, Miss Branch?

RB: It was--. I learned that my grand--one of my grandmothers--both of my grandmothers, they had stuck their receipts at cheap--the least expensive one, used to be fifteen dollars.

JS: Ten.

RB: Ten? Their receipts were stuck in the Bible, and I was going through their Bibles and that's how I found out they were members of the NAACP.

EC: You know, in Claiborne they used to burn those cards when they would come because they were afraid.

JS: Oh.

RB: Oh. That someone would get them. I don't think my grandmother was too afraid of the police, and I wasn't afraid of the police.

JS: We weren't.

RB: And now, now--. Of course, I was just plain listed as crazy. You know, I did things because I was crazy.

JS: But you know what happened? Jones County, being one of those places where the Klan was? See, the Klan was like this; they would go to other communities and terrorize them. They wouldn't kill in their own community. They were scared to come out there in Jones County because we knew who were behind them sheets. We knew who they were. So, my grandfather, we were up there in Soso meeting, and Harley, he put on his sheet and went up there and ran all up there.

EC: [Laughs]

JS: Because you couldn't tell him, because he was a mixture of white and Indian.

EC: So he was infiltrating the Klan?

JS: He's infiltrating--. He says, "You know I know you." He pulled all them sheets off their face, and they were going--. They were getting ready to come down in Forrest County and raid these people down here because they had so many kin folks up there.

They didn't want to kill their own folk. Well it's just amazing how terrorists think, you know, and those are the same people that, where we live, my father's people, we're down there with the Musgroves. We're with all of them. Once the Musgroves came to--they came to join Newt Knight's deserters. That's how they came--.

RB: Now, there was a--. Is that the same as Governor Musgrove?

JS: They were my cousins.

RB: Oh, okay. Yes, he did tell that to me once.

JS: Did he tell you that?

RB: Yes.

JS: He did?

RB: Yes, because I was campaigning for him at one time. Musgrove was all right.

JS: Well, what happened, you know, I was up there in a meeting with him, and you know, like I say, you were terrorized. The reason that I survived, I know, my people claimed me. Newt Knight is the father on my grandfather's birth certificate. They claimed their children. They gave them land. So, that's how I survived. I don't have to worry about who I am because, they will tell you, "Oh, that's my cousin."

EC: So they would put the little protection out?

JS: Yes, you know--.

RB: Yes. There were certain people you did not mess with.

EC: Because they had white kin?

JS: No.

RB: Because their --.

JS: Because Newt would kill them.

RB: Their daddies and their granddaddies were who they were.

JS: Newt would kill them. If they messed with any of his people, he would kill them.

RB: There's a poster, we had it here during one event, back--. Let me see. I first got the poster, it was just a flier, two, four six, about six pages, you know, folded in trifold. [1:30:00] And, that's when I learned that my grandfather had gone to register to vote when we started registering downtown with Theron Lynd.

JS: That's right. I suspected.

RB: Papa Blue.

EC: Can you say his full name for the record?

RB: Lee Val Graves. L-E-E V-A-L Graves, G-R-A-V-E-S. Lee Val Graves.

EC: So you found the record that he had--.

JS: We had a picture of him.

RB: It was a picture.

EC: Oh, it was a picture?

RB: Someone had sent the flier to me from Washington, DC. They had a big conference in Washington, and he and another guy were standing there at Theron Lynd's counter. The same counter I had gone to to answer my constitution question. I was registered first. I was the youngest--. I think I was the youngest one to register in Forrest County.

JS: You probably were.

RB: When I got to be twenty-one I went down there, but at that time--.

EC: What year would that have been? I can--. Was it 68?

RB: I was born in [19]41, so [19]61, [19]62?

JS: But I was registered in [19]61. See, I'm a whole [year] older than she. I was born in 1940.

EC: Tell us what it was like to go to register.

RB: Oh, I had three big men at my back.

EC: Who did you have?

RB: Mr. J.C. Fairley, Mr. James Bourne, and Mr. Vernon Dahmer.

EC: Is that Mr. Bourne, is he kin to Miss Connor? No, Gould. I'm sorry. I'm mistaking the names.

RB: You're thinking of Peggy Jean Gould, Mr. Gould.

EC: Yes, yes. My mistake. Yes. So you said it was Mr. Bourne?

RB: James Bourne.

EC: Mr. Fairley?

RB: J.C. Fairley.

JS: Was it Dahmer going?

RB: And Mr. Dahmer.

EC: So they came with you when you--?

RB: Standing right at my back. See, Theron Lynd, I don't know if you've ever seen a picture of him.

EC: Please describe him for us.

JS: Really fat.

RB: [Laughs] Huge guy, about like this.

JS: Really fat.

RB: About six-three, four. But he had a tiny little head, so you had this huge person with this tiny little head.

JS: Probably weighed about four hundred pounds.

RB: And he would walk back and forth and he would say, "This is your question. Can you answer this constitutional question?" And I wrote and wrote and wrote, because you know, Miss Chambers had prepared us well on how--on the constitution. And I wrote and I wrote, and finally he walks up and takes it and says, and handed it to a clerk, and said, "She passed." He didn't even read it.

EC: When you say you were well prepared, was that your school teacher or was that a--?

RB: School teacher. Ms. Marjory Chambers was our world history teacher, and she did a lot with us knowing about the Constitution and things like that.

EC: Was she specifically trying to prepare you to register, or was that part of the teaching?

RB: No, no. That was just part of Miss Chambers's teaching. In fact, she was one of those teachers, when they quote/unquote integrated the schools, they pulled her out of the black school and sent her over to the white school because she was a good teacher. And you know, there was a law on the books and I don't know if it's still there, and I say, people should look to see. I should look to see if it's still there. If there was something that you

wanted to do that wasn't taught in Mississippi, you could be sent out of the state and the state would pay the bill. Well--.

EC: And, I'll just say for the record, this is before Brown, and this is when they were trying to avoid--.

JS: Integrating.

EC: --desegregating the schools, and they thought that way they could avoid the whole separate but equals.

RB: Yes.

JS: That's how my husband went to medical school.

EC: Did he?

JS: Mm-hmm.

RB: Really?

EC: On one of those scholarships?

RB: I didn't know that.

EC: Did he go to--.

JS: Well, he thought he was, but his grandfather was Jewish and they really had sent him to school. We didn't know that until after we were married. He was trying to pay his loan back, and they told him. "You don't have a loan." So he came down here with Dr. Paris because he was trying to pay off the State of Mississippi. And, there was such a need for medical care, so he just stayed. Dr. Paris, he couldn't take it. He had to go back to Chicago.

EC: Where was your husband from?

JS: He was from Memphis.

EC: Memphis? And so he came here to pay off his school?

JS: From Tennessee.

EC: And then stayed? So did he go to Meharry?

JS: He went to Meharry. [1:35:00] And his sister, and now that we're talking about him it's amazing. When he first came, he was trying to take the license, to get his license, and he had to go up on the freight elevator, but when he got up in there, he took tests with everybody else. He said, he was determined when he came back he would integrate Forrest General, the county hospital. He made a complaint with HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare], he was going to integrate Methodist. He was going to integrate them doctor's office, just as soon as they started taking Medicare, because it's federal money. He was going to integrate everything. And basically, that's what he did.

EC: Did he ever work with the Medical Committee [for] Human Rights? Is that what it's called? It was some of the doctors that came into the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. [Robert] Smith, up in Jackson.

JS: Mason? Jackson?

RB: You remember Marian Wright? She was part of that group.

EC: Yes.

JS: I don't know if he did or not because--.

RB: He was so busy.

JS: One thing about that, I think he was trying to do what he had to do.

RB: I think when he was working so hard, he eventually became the president of the NAACP, but I wasn't here then. But before I left, he was busy.

JS: Delivering babies?

RB: Because in that clinic, as she said, babies were born there. When we got Head Start--and that's a whole other story--I sent a busload of children to Lady Bird Johnson, to Washington, to keep until we got Head Start. They kept saying we were--. You know, it was a communist movement. And I had made the comment one night to Robert Beech. We were on the phone, and I said, "Robert, I'm having a hard time here. I don't have a care some days. I don't have money to get on the bus. And I have no money to put my children in daycare," I said. And the few daycares, you know, they had to charge. They had a business.

JS: They had a business.

RB: And I didn't have the money. I said, you know what? I ought to send them to Washington. If I had the money I could send them to the White House, because she had maids and cooks and it's a big house.

EC: She can take care of them?

RB: And Lady Bird can take care of them.

EC: [Laughs]

RB: And he called back the next day, and I still don't know where that money came from. He called back the next day and said, "Raylawni, can you--were you serious about sending your children to the White House?" I said, "Yes, I was serious, but--." He said, "Can you get enough children to fill up a Greyhound bus?" I said, "To go to Washington?" He said, "Yes, and I need women to go with them to take care of the

children,” because they were preschoolers. They were five and under. And it was January, and we sent those poor children to Washington, DC, without caps and gloves and hats, and it snowed. And someone on that end, women met those children with the proper clothing and boots and stuff, and I have a picture of my--. Only two of them went because Timothy was in school over at Eaton. Sitting on the floor of the House of Representatives. But we sent a busload of children. We got Head Start after that. And I was a resource teacher for Head Start.

EC: Was it--. Excuse me. Was it in Mississippi already? Was CDGM [Childhood Development Group of Mississippi] in here, or was that--

RB: No, that was before.

JS: That was before.

EC: It was before that?

RB: We were doing a whole lot of things before. The one thing I learned from the students and people coming in--. I don't have really anything bad to say. I learned that not all white people were bad.

JS: They're not.

RB: Up until then, they were devils. They would--. Excuse me. They would stick it in any hole. That's what I thought.

JS: That's the sin in people. They need to be converted.

RB: But we did so much. I give them credit. I learned from them that not all people are bad, but as she said, they came for an experience. Now, there was some people who went back and did [1:40:00] some wonderful things. Jill Wakeman, who stayed with

that lady that lived on the corner of Tipton and some street over there in East Jerusalem. Jill Wakeman was her maiden name. She married but she still goes under Jill Wakeman if you look her up on anywho.com. She opened the biggest soup kitchen. It's still running in San Francisco, I believe. They had her on *60 Minutes* or *48 Hours*, or something like that. She and a girl of Chinese extraction. Her name was Marian--.

JS: You can't remember her name?

RB: It's been so long. But Jill I won't forget because Jill sent ten dollars in an envelope to me the year--the two and a half years I was in school in New York, and that's what I lived on in New York City: ten dollars a month. And she opened this food kitchen and it's still one of the biggest food kitchens in America.

EC: The reason I asked about the Medical Committee for Human Rights was, when you mentioned that your husband was determined to integrate those hospitals, because, I can't remember which law it was, but one of those laws that was passed as part of the war on poverty was bringing the federal money into the hospitals.

JS: Ain't that right.

EC: And they were using that as the leverage. And so, I just wondered if he might have had any contact with them over integrating the hospitals.

JS: Oh, he did. They were friends of his. He worked with them, Dr. Mason and Dr. Smith and all of them. They had an organization among themselves.

RB: Yes, because there was no one group.

JS: See, my husband, the people in Laurel were wonderful. They had a black hospital. He transferred his patients up there. That's how he met me.

RB: And what was--. What hospital was that?

JS: The Benevolent Hospital up there in Laurel.

RB: I didn't know about it.

JS: It's a black--wonderful. My daddy and my uncle had built a church in Lucedale, and they contracted pneumonia. So, my first cousin and I went down for the dedication of the church. So, these little black doctors were lying there, and my husband was single and the other one was married. So, I thought he was--. I was on my way to Dillard University, and I wasn't looking for no husband. So my husband told my daddy, "Now that's the one I want."

RB: [Laughs]

EC: Did he talk to you?

JS: No, he didn't say a word to me. Came out to support my first cousin from Soso, teaching out in Pascagoula. That's how they recruited their patients. So anyway, he checked. I said, "Oh, I'm so glad you came. You can check my daddy." Daddy had pneumonia, put him dead in the hospital, and so, he was courting me through my daddy.

RB: [Laughs]

JS: Because my husband--.

EC: So you went, too? Was your daddy going to be in trouble if you wasn't there?

JS: No, my daddy was trying to get me married off.

RB: Well, you didn't talk to the girl first. You talked to the family.

JS: No, you talked to the dad. So, he was just boosting me up. And I heard him in there saying, "Well, if you get her, you get the right woman."

EC: That's what your daddy said?

JS: "She might be young, but she's very mature. She's been taking care of my business and stuff. She been forty when she was born." So things like that. I'm listening to him talking about me. So that's how I met him, and then I find he was a very nice person, you know, and I really liked him. And I should thank my daddy for finding me a husband.

EC: So did you still go off to Dillard?

JS: No, I didn't. I got married within four months.

EC: Did you miss going off to Dillard?

JS: Not really, because you know, education is a continuing thing. You don't have to have those letters to know that you are a sponge.

RB: That you can learn.

JS: That you are learning everything coming through your way.

EC: Yes, ma'am.

JS: And my husband made me see that. Then I went down to William Carey for a while, and I had three little children. And it was just hard on me. So my husband was saying, "Why are you doing this? You don't have to have any letters behind your name. You're already my advisor. You're everybody's advisor in Hattiesburg." So, then I said, well you know, maybe that's not for me. But I thought about going back, but like I said, education is something, if you have it within you, you just have it. You don't have to prove that to anyone, unless you're looking for a particular job or something. You know? But I never had no problem. I integrated the tax assessor's office in 1976.

RB: Yes, you became--.

JS: The first black. I worked down there [1:45:00] with Theron Lynd.

EC: So you got elected in [19]76?

JS: No, that was my first--. They were hired.

EC: You were hired?

JS: I was elected in ninety--I think [19]92, or something.

EC: Okay, so it's--. So, who hired you over there?

JS: Well, you know it was political.

RB: Yes, everything's political.

JS: My neighbor was named Henry McFall. He made sure he integrated everybody. If he supported a candidate, he was going to have to have a job out of here. So, Mr. [Warren] Byrd hired me because Henry recommended me, and it worked out real, real well.

EC: So, if he was going to get support from the black community for voting, he was going to have to hire somebody that was [inaudible] of you?

JS: Yes, that's the political payoff.

EC: So, what was it like to work in the office with Theron Lynd?

JS: Well, he and I became friends because, see, once he didn't have that power, and then he was a diabetic, and I would come home and eat. And so, he wanted me to go down to Mobile Street and get him some food. And I said, "Okay, now if I'm late coming in, you better vouch for me." I would bring him food back, and I wouldn't get him all the stuff he wanted, because he did begin to lose weight. But you know, that's why you have to do forgiveness. He had a job to do. He had to do that to keep his job.

RB: To keep his job. Yes.

JS: He had the Sovereign [Mississippi State Sovereignty] Commission. He had to do that. So, he apologized to me.

EC: He did?

RB: Oh really?

JS: For his behavior. He did. I would stop by. He would go in the little-- downstairs on the right side?

RB: Mm-hmm.

JS: And I'd go out there and take me a break and talk to him, because some things I wanted to know.

RB: I would never have thought you would have been Theron Lynd's friend.

JS: I was.

RB: Wow.

JS: And also know somebody else, that old Klansman down there, a lawyer?
What's his name?

RB: Jimmy Dukes?

JS: No, not Dukes. He's all right.

RB: He's all right? [Laughs]

JS: Yes, the one down there behind Jimmy Dukes. The Klansman.

RB: They were all Klansmen back then.

JS: But anyway, what happened was, way back I was trying to do my mission work, and they had butane tanks in Palmers Crossing before they incorporated, so I was

trying to get some gas for these poor people freezing to death. So anyway, I did one-on-one. I would go by Mr. [M.M.] Roberts, the one the stadium is named after, all the politicians, and I told him, "What I want you to do, don't give me any money, but go down there to the butane company and I want you to put a hundred gallons, and then leave it open. And I'm going to refer them to the people that need it." And it's amazing how generous they were in helping me with people.

EC: So that was so that people could have fuel to heat their homes?

JS: They didn't have any heat. They couldn't cook. They was cooking on butane.

EC: So you could get the whites, to donate money that way, or to pay for the gas?

JS: I did. I had one lady--. I can't even call her name Thacker. She won't let me, even though she's deceased. I would go by there and she would have me a bag of a thousand dollars.

EC: This is a white lady?

JS: White lady. And she would call and tell me, I'm never supposed to tell that, her name. I would go by these houses, and "Doc, send your little ole wife out here." You know, so she, "I got something for you all." Because we had to buy food. Had to feed the people.

EC: Is this in the movement?

RB: There were--. Yes. During those years, late [19]50s to let's say until I left, I know. There were many people--.

JS: White. White people.

RB: What we'd call white people, who were sympathizers, and who was family.
And, when Robert--. Robert Beech used to go out, and they would meet at midnight or after.

JS: To get money.

RB: To get money. But they couldn't be seen by anybody in the community.

JS: Could be cash money, too.

RB: And it had to be cash, of course.

EC: What would happen to a white person if they publically stood with the
movement?

RB: They probably would be killed, or they would never have a job or anything
like that.

JS: A recent one, the young man, the clerk for the city?

RB: Oh, yes.

JS: You know, they went over and threatened him and he resigned, because they
didn't want him to be the clerk for Johnny DuPree.

RB: What man?

JS: Mr. [Eddie] Myers.

RB: Oh yes.

JS: They ran him away.

EC: He's African American?

RB: No. No, no.

JS: No, he's a white man.

EC: I'm talking about Mr. DuPree.

RB: Our mayor is a man of color, yes.

JS: Yes, he is. [1:50:00]

RB: Lives right down the street.

JS: It's amazing--.

EC: So they didn't want the white clerk to work for him?

RB: Well, they didn't want him to be on his side, and do anything that was going to help him.

JS: He was on his side.

RB: See, he had enough--. He was in a position where he really knew what they were doing, what the bad--. We have some that we really need to get out.

JS: This is--.

RB: They just fired--. They gave him such a hard time.

JS: Well he resigned.

RB: Yes, he resigned.

JS: The young man to have it now, he really is a Republican. He's black, but they see that they had to do the same thing that my friend did; make sure that the white Republicans gave him that job because he was the most qualified person. So, the legal guy's there now.

RB: Oh, they're so upset about that.

JS: Oh, he's a nice little guy.

RB: You're talking about Kermit?

JS: Kermit.

RB: Yes.

JS: I love him.

RB: Yes.

EC: When you all went to register to vote, was that when the lawsuit was going on?

JS: Yes. When I went to--.

RB: That was the second lawsuit.

JS: This was the second one.

EC: Yes.

JS: We did have one really before that, in the [19]50s.

EC: This is the one that the justice department was part of.

JS: Yes. This one was from a private attorney out of McComb, the first one in the [19]50s. I went in nineteen--. The reason I know it was 1961, because I just made twenty-one. I couldn't register until then. A friend of mine and I, were bowling bad. We weren't going for nobody, we were going by ourselves. So, when we got down there, that old Cajun, this constable, I thought he was going to block us. He opened the door for us, said, "Everybody just come on in. You can just go in and register." I said, "Really?"

RB: And they just let you go in?

JS: Yeah, because they had filed a suit. The justice department told them to register anybody that come in the door.

RB: Oh, okay.

JS: We had already registered.

EC: And they let you?

JS: Yes, we went in and registered. We didn't have to take no test or nothing.

EC: Were you family people, were they registered?

RB: Isn't that something?

JS: My husband refused to register until everybody else did, because they had sent for him to come register. They had twelve on record. He said, "I'm not registering until all of my people are registering."

EC: They were trying to use him to say they weren't discriminating?

JS: Yes. That's what they were saying.

RB: And there's always the thought, whether you are black or white, the vote really wasn't for poor folks, ignorant folks. It was only for the gentlemen.

EC: It was kind of a privilege almost.

RB: The gentlemen.

EC: The gentlemen?

RB: Yes. You were a landowner. You had to be a landowner to be a gentleman, and have money. So it was only for gentlemen in the beginning. That's why I chuckle when people say, "Well, the Constitution--." You know, the Constitution doesn't mean the same to me as it might to you.

JS: That's why they got the Willows to register; because they had a lot of land. He was--. There was twelve of them. Mr. Berger was one of them.

RB: Yes, but look at how--who they were. Mr. Berger--.

JS: I know, they had just a few, just to say that they didn't discriminate.

RB: Yes, just a few. Oh, okay. Yes.

JS: Well, I like--. I loved Mr. Berger, because it was--. It was Mr. Berger, Professor Todd and Mr. Noonkester is the one that integrated. Dr. [J. Ralph] Noonkester.

RB: Yes, they got together to integrate.

JS: They did.

RB: Quote-unquote integrate Wesley--I mean, William Carey. But we didn't--. There was no--.

JS: They paved the way, though.

RB: They didn't--. Yes.

JS: They were the background people. See, in the movement, you had different kinds of people because you had to communicate with them. You had the biracial committee out to boycott. So, some people could communicate with others, and could get them to do--. The movement people were so bold in everything, they were so demanding, until the people that had to make the change, all those merchants, they were afraid of them.

RB: When people like Stokely Carmichael, who became [Kwame] Ture, came to town, and there was a mass meeting. Any time any of those kinds of people would come in, there would be a mass meeting. They were what we considered really radical. You know, I would go down and I had a pee-in once. Excuse me again, sir.

M1: My ears are burning.

RB: We had gone up above Jackson there, [1:55:00] and we planned to take up an Air Force base up in North Mississippi, which we did, but I told them, I can't, because I have three children I have to take care of. I need to stay alive. And I really believed that the

United States would kill them all. I just thought, when they get on that base they're going to kill them. But they froze them out. And the--. On the way back from that particular meeting--

JS: Was Father Gwynn with you all?

RB: Who?

JS: Father Gwynn. Was he there?

RB: Yes. He might--. Yes.

JS: He integrated everything, this Catholic priest, and those children.

RB: He would tell a lot of stuff, too. He was a stoolie. He--. I stopped at a service station. Children had to go to the bathroom. It was me and one of those singing boy--Watts girls. She lived down on Mobile Street. Mary? Anyway, she was one that went to Washington with the children, and the children had to go to the bathroom. We stopped at this little service station and I asked for the key. And he said, "Why? Ain't no lock on the washroom back there for the colored folks. You see it back there?" I said, "I want the key to the ladies room, right there." He said, "Oh no, you can't use that. That's for white folks only." And I said, "Children, pee right there." And we peed. I had them all pee in the door. We had a pee-in.

EC: What'd he do?

RB: "I can't believe she--do you see what she--what?"

JS: They had to go to the bathroom.

EC: You reckon he gave the next person the key?

RB: I said, "Now, the next time someone asks for that key, you give the key to them, and you won't have a pee-in."

EC: You wasn't worried?

RB: No.

EC: No?

RB: No.

EC: You didn't have sense to be worried?

RB: I didn't have sense enough to be afraid.

JS: But she had a mission. I'm telling you.

RB: I didn't have sense enough to be afraid.

JS: There was a--. It was a mission.

RB: People ask that question about us coming out here. "Weren't you afraid?"

We did everything we could to get rid of the bodyguards after we find out one of them was the guy that tried to kill me once, back in [19]62. I said, "Elaine, one of the bodyguards is that police officer that tried to kill me." Well, I guess not many people could tell a story like this now, because they will kill you, but he--. I was getting my children from my grandmother's. My husband and I had gone to the movies. About ten o'clock at night. When I went to knock on the door, this thing jumps up out of the dark at the edge of the porch, cuts the screen, opens the screen, and kicks in the hard door. And, my husband was so afraid of white people. I mean, I didn't have that fear. He did.

JS: But he did.

RB: And, two of the children were in a bed over in the corner, and he had Johnny, who was six months old. I remember it so well. Johnny was born in April and it was October. And, my husband said, "Hurry up!" And he took--. The police officer backhanded him with his flashlight, and it just missed my baby's head. Well you know, I was mad as a hatter. I said, "Why don't you hit somebody that's not holding a baby?" And he was a big guy. He picked up a small lamp table next to my great-grandmother's bed, hit it up against the wall and broke it, and come at me with the leg.

Well, I had long hair then, but I had it in a bun up on top of my head, and when he hit me that cushioned, but I scared him by running into him. And I was 94 pounds and he was about 300. And he fell on me and we fell back on the bed. And I could feel this gun, and it wasn't locked--it wasn't locked in the scabbard. I pulled that gun out and I stuck it in his belly. I said, "If you don't get off of me, I will shoot you," and his partner pulled a gun on everybody else. I said, "Do you think--. There's five boys standing up here and two men and several women. Do you think they're going to ever let you get out of here? We will cut you up in little bitty pieces and put you in that toilet hole out there, and we'll take that car and [2:00:00] drop it in the river. So you best get off of me." He backed up off of me. I said, "Now we can go downtown and call the chief." And we went downtown to--. The old police station is in City Hall, and I got on the phone and called the White House. They said, "When you get into trouble, call the White House." I believed it. I called the White House. And, the attorney general got on the phone. Who was it then? Oh help me out here. This is [19]62.

EC: Kennedy? Robert Kennedy? John Doar? Were you talking to--.

RB: No, it wasn't Kennedy. Kennedy was after that. Anyway, the attorney general got on the phone and I said, "I am Raylawni Young. I am at the police station in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and a police officer tried to kill me." And I could hear the operators laughing on the phone. They were listening from right here in Hattiesburg. Because they said, "You want what?" I said, "I want the White House and I want it right now. We're supposed to--. I'm supposed to call the White House right now." That was the-- . That's how we knew the boys were dead up there in Meridian, because if you didn't call when you got where you were going, no, you're dead. They said, "Get this crazy woman out of here." They took me home with my three children and arrested my husband, who hadn't done a thing.

EC: What kind of things were you involved with at that point in the movement? What were you--.

RB: After that? Everything.

EC: Well what were you doing before that?

JS: So much going on.

RB: There was so much going on. But after that, I was officially on the books as the president--as the secretary of the NAACP of Forrest County. I went and joined. I had never paid that money. Supported but had never paid that money. I joined the NAACP. Later on I worked with all those groups that became COFO, because, you know, we were doing one thing, they were doing another. But when people came to town, like Ture, who were very, very radical, we would say, you know, Hattiesburg is not for you.

EC: Is that after the Meredith march, or would this be like during the [19]63,[19]64, [19]65?

RB: Yes, that was that time frame, when people--.

JS: The marching really escalated after the death of Medgar Evers. And then when Mr. Charles came down. He was so mad with everybody. You know, he had them two guns on him. Whenever Charles Evers, he had Deacons for Defense everywhere to the protected people. Now that's when white people really got scared because he was crazy.

RB: No, he wasn't. He wasn't any crazier than I was.

JS: But I'm saying--. They'll say you're crazy.

RB: But he did. Yes, they'll call you crazy and supposedly let you get away with stuff.

JS: He went out to this little motel. He got out there. He said, "What am I doing out here? I'm integrated now." Said, "Tell them children that, get on their broom now. I've got to come in. I'm sleeping." I said, "Mr. Evers, you're going to put the children on the floor again?" "Yes, ma'am."

EC: So you're telling me he would go integrate the hotel and then he'd come--.

JS: Sleep at my house.

RB: Leave and come--. He knew where he was safe. [Laughter]

JS: He wants some black person, and the children know. They knew what to do. See, I had twin beds and I had the one bed, but my son's bed, he slept in my son's room. So my son had to sleep on the floor in the--with the girls. So anyway, that was his room. He wanted some breakfast. He would go to show out and integrate, and have them guns on him.

And I felt so safe. I said, "This is a man after my own heart. He said if anybody bothered us, he's going to go through and mow them down." Ain't that impressive?

RB: Mm-hmm. I'm the last one. I'm the last one living now in Hattiesburg that went to the March on Washington.

JS: I was going to--.

RB: Verland died.

JS: Right. I couldn't go because I had--.

RB: Well, you were like me. I got someone to keep the children there, but I had--.

JS: I was going to go with that Farrakhan group, but they said--. They told me that they had a bus. A sensible bus out of McComb. And I checked on it.

RB: Oh, I went out of Greenville.

JS: I checked on it. They didn't have it. So I was not. I put them on [2:05:00] a van, over at that rental van over at Deermont. They could get in the van. I wasn't going with them.

EC: Did either of you all ever meet Medgar Evers when he would come through? When he was here?

RB: Oh, yes. We knew Medgar.

EC: You want to tell us about him?

RB: Medgar? Oh gosh.

JS: He would be at that drug store I was at.

RB: He was our field secretary and he was--.

JS: At the drug store all the time.

RB: He was very, very--. He was a gentleman. He was mild.

JS: Very articulate.

RB: But serious. But very serious.

JS: A scholar-type person.

EC: Was he organizing a youth branch in Hattiesburg at that time? I know there was one near Palmers.

RB: There were youth branches associated with every chapter. It's always been.

JS: We had one.

EC: Were you all a part of that?

RB: No, we were old ladies. [Laughs]

JS: We were young. We were just twenty-one.

RB: We were young and had children.

JS: When I first got married I was just nineteen.

RB: I was eighteen.

JS: And then we lived in Palmer's Crossing down by the lumber company. And somebody said, "Aren't you all scared?" And I said, I think I'm waiting on them, if they come. So I was in the house when they threw their skunk in my yard. And they said they were around there still. I said, "Okay. Come around. So you do know where I live, right?" "Yes, we know where you live." I said, "Well I'm waiting for you. Come on." And they never showed up. Same thing with the little clock start ticking. You know, you call us and we got the doctor's exchange. So they would answer the phone for us. They had arrested us when we first came here. Reverend Willow didn't want us to join until we joined his church.

He didn't want us to be part of the movement, so we had to move our membership over to United Methodist Church of St. Paul.

EC: Why did he--. What did he say to you all?

JS: He didn't want this church to be burned. They had just burned down the Catholic hall. He was of that age, you know, he feared that they would destroy--. He had a whole lot of stuff.

RB: There weren't but about six ministers that supported what some people called "The Movement."

JS: Just a few.

RB: Just a few. Ponder.

JS: St. Paul. Ebenezer [Missionary Baptist Church].

RB: [E.E.] Grimmett from St. Paul. Was it Radlow? The pastor that was at--.

JS: True Light?

RB: True Light.

JS: Just a few.

RB: And St. James. Just a very few. Zion Chapel.

JS: They were afraid that they would burn their church.

RB: And they would have. I mean, they--.

JS: They would have.

RB: Yes, they would have.

JS: That was the Deacons for Defense that kept them from doing that, from Bogalusa they came up and guarded us.

RB: But I thought that the few pastors that did, that let us use their church for mass meetings, and then in [19]64 for Freedom Summer. I see Freedom Summer totally differently than many people.

EC: Can you tell us about that?

JS: Who wrote that book?

RB: Well, it was a summer. It was just, you know, an event that happened, where, as she said, we lived it every day.

JS: See, they came in. They would have Vacation Bible School.

RB: McAdam. Doug McAdam.

JS: The workers from the movement, when COFO, when they all came together and they sent everybody everywhere, mostly they were teachers, musicians, and they integrated the libraries, stuff like that. So, the churches--. Some of the churches, Mt. Zion, they really didn't know that they were doing all of that, because they were in vacation Bible school, and they lasted all summer. They worked out of little churches. You had all kind of people who came here. But Hattiesburg was like, if you came in, we protected everybody and they felt safe staying with us.

RB: But now, northern Mississippi are totally different. Northern Mississippi and west Mississippi, like over at McComb, was different.

JS: Right.

RB: Where, in Forrest County, Jones County, we'd fight back.

JS: We would.

EC: Can you tell me about Mr. Dahmer?

JS: Well, Mr. Dahmer, that I remember, one of his wives, his first wife, was related to me. And, [2:10:00] I had known the Dahmers. When I was a little girl I used to stay with my great, great-uncle, who lived down the street. And I was very familiar with Mr. Dahmer and his family, because I'd caught myself, when I was about thirteen, liking one of the sons. And he said, "You can't do that. That's your cousin."

RB: You're cousins.

JS: And I said, "Well, Mr. Dahmer, am I kin to everybody?" He said, "Just about."

RB: Yes, I couldn't marry anybody from out there.

JS: If they look like us, you better check them out.

RB: Yes, check them.

JS: So, anyway, I have known him all of my life. He was just a kind of person that would help everybody, black and white. He was a businessman. He had a lumber mill, and he was, you know, a farmer. He would share with people, his crops and stuff. He just wanted to register to vote.

RB: I think he was the first man of color here in Forrest County, or first man period, to own an automatic cotton picker.

JS: That's right.

RB: He paid more for people who picked cotton for him.

JS: Worked for him.

RB: That worked for him on his farm. I didn't know his first wife, but I knew his first children. One of them is still living, Vernon. And the other one died. But, the night--. February the 10th, 1966 was the day he died.

EC: January?

RB: January 10, 1966. I was here. And that day I told Dr. Fish, he was our advisor and plus the work-study we had to work for him because nobody else would have anything to do with us. I told him, "I can't come to work today." That morning--. That night before, Mr. Dahmer, they had a little grocery store. One of his aunts, Aunt Raney, slept in the store. And, he had sent two boxes of groceries by his sister, Mrs. Beard, and Mrs. Beard's daughter, Lorna. She was about twelve years old at the time. So, this was before midnight, so that would have been the 9th of January. He knew I was having a hard time. And I had gone to the Catholic church and asked for some food, and they had refused food. There was something not right at that time at that Catholic church. And, the next morning about five-thirty, I decided--. I said, "I've got to call Mr. Dahmer and thank him for this food before I get started on my day," because some days I walk from the river here, and I had an eight o'clock class and had three babies to try to get some peanut butter and jelly on some sandwiches and leave at a cousin's house on the corner, and then Timothy went on to school at Eaton. And, they fire bombed his house that night, and he was at Forrest General. Now, I had asked some physicians since then, why they didn't put him on a respirator, and they said they only had two and they were in use. I don't know if that's the truth or not. But I was halfway between here and the hospital, walking on the service road, and someone stopped and said, "If you're going down to the hospital to see Mr. Dahmer, he's dead. He died."

That family is very special. They are one of many special families all over this country, really, and if we don't stop and change the language from black and white, this whole world is just going to implode. We have to stop. We have to recognize each other as humans, all of us. What's going on now in the Middle East, I would say, "You two better go and get some DNA done because you're probably cousins." And it's all over money. I spent twenty-six years in the military, and until I got back to Mississippi--. I knew my career was up at lieutenant colonel when I got back to Mississippi because [2:15:00] of the person who was in charge. You run into these people everywhere; they're not just in Mississippi. I wouldn't go anyplace else to live. Would you live someplace else now?

JS: I choose to stay here.

RB: I choose Mississippi.

JS: I love it.

RB: I got called a nigger by a Cuban in Miami, and I had never been--. I'm sitting on my front porch and this big-wheeled trunk comes around. They're flying a Cuban flag and call me a nigger in Spanish? I said, "I'm moving back to the United States," and we moved back to Hattiesburg in ninety--in [19]88. I choose to live here. I choose to get along with people. I choose to love people. Those are my choices.

JS: Also, accept differences. I like different cultures, and I think we all can get along. If I respect your culture and you respect mine, then you wouldn't have these labels. You know, you can learn from a lot of cultures. Because people think that I'm Spanish, and I told my granddaughter, who is half Spanish, she wants to teach me Spanish so I know what they're talking about. So, anyway, at first I was kind of offended, until my son told me,

“They’re going to speak their language. They don’t--. They’re not doing that to offend you, but you need to learn their language.” But they understand me.

They’ll try, you know, and one thing about their culture that I really like, I like to cook and I like food. When I go to visit my son, they turn the kitchen over to me. She’ll come in, my daughter-in-law, and wash dishes and assist me, but she wants the American cooking, so I like the Spanish food. So, of the different cultures, I think we can accept each other and learn from each other, but if I respect you as a person, then I’m going to give you that love that comes from above. I’m going to treat you right. I’m not going to do those things--that fear that’s in people, it’s going to take a long time to come out because I don’t have any problems with anyone, but a lot of people do. A lot of people feel that there’s a difference, that one race is better than the other one. There’s no such thing. People are people, and when you--. They love their culture and they just want to retain their culture. But if we respect it, like I said, I learned--. I don't know what I would do without the black culture, because they really accepted me.

RB: Well, I love--. I respect people’s different cultures, but I think if you make a choice to come to America, you should at least respect my flag, number one, and that’s the American flag. If you want to be an American, I don’t care what you do at home. I think, that’s the culture you’re talking about.

JS: I’m talking about the culture, different cultures.

RB: In the kitchen, the different foods and--.

JS: The different cultures in America.

RB: But I don't believe a Muslim man has a right to cut his daughter's throat because she's kissed a boy and not married. And there are a lot of those cases in court here in America because they want to maintain the way their culture they've been in all their life, but this is America. You made a choice to come here.

JS: That's illegal here.

RB: Yes. It's illegal. Well, it's more than illegal; it's just not right. And I think if you want to live in a place where you do those things--. Of course, it's in Leviticus, but I think they ought to rip out the first five books, Torah, and burn it. That's what I think. But, I love people. I don't care what your religion.

JS: I'm doing better about that because I'm trying to understand other religions and their practices and see how that relates to me, because it's amazing when I can talk to them. I'm a Christian. I don't have any problem with that. [2:20:00] If you're a Muslim and you're not the one that's believing the violence.

RB: The Shia or the Sunni.

JS: I'm with you. But, I'm learning so my mind is so broad now. I'm learning to get along with them, just like I would not offend my little Muslim cousins because I wanted to put up a wreath because they don't believe in Christmas. They don't have Christian beliefs in Christ, but I just wanted to be with my Christian decoration. So, what I told him and the wife, I said, "What you all need to do now, that has nothing to do with you. I'm disabled. I want to put that wreath up there." [Laughter] I said, "So what you need to do, you're not engaged in my practice. I'm just asking you to put the wreath up there." So I got to teach Jehovah's Witnesses the same thing. And I said, Well what's wrong with that,

Sandra? Could you help me get--look up there on the shelf and just get those little ornaments down for Christmas?"

EC: Help you out with that?

JS: Yes. So, she finally, she said, "You're just as right as you can be. That has nothing to do with me. I'm just doing you a favor." That's understanding and communicating. Now, he wants me--. They're just so concerned about pork, the Muslims. Now, when the Lord died for our sins, there are no unclean food. So, if I believe in that and I can show you where it's biblical, I said, you have to take some of my beliefs, because I'm going to eat a little pork every now and then. It might not be good for me, but I'm going to do it.

RB: There's nothing wrong with it if it's fresh.

JS: That's right. And if it's clean.

RB: And there was a reason all of that was written. You have to take the context.

JS: I do.

RB: But they're just living in the one through five century.

EC: Can I ask you a quick question? Do you remember any of the SNCC people that were coming through?

JS: Oh yes.

RB: Yes.

EC: [Lawrence] Guyot and [Avon] Rollins and Curtis [Hayes]?

RB: We know all of them.

JS: Yes.

RB: We meet every spring in Lawrence.

JS: Let me tell you something about that Guyot. I was the supplier. They came by my house and they didn't have no money, they didn't have things that's necessary for-- personal things. Make sure they had deodorant and stuff. So they came by one day, and I was so pregnant--I was about eight months--I couldn't drive my little Volkswagen. So, Guyot was saying, "You know, Miss Smith, that little Volkswagen's just sitting there. I could really use that." I said, "Well, are you twenty-one?"

RB: That's Guyot.

JS: I said, "Now, Doug is not twenty-one."

RB: Yes, Doug was a teenager.

JS: "I don't even know you." I said, "But anyway, I'm going to trust you." So, I let him have my little Volkswagen. They took it to New Orleans and burned up the motor.

RB: [Laughs] Run it out of oil.

JS: They did. So, the SNCC bought me another motor. So, I said, "When you all get through tearing it up, I'm going to buy me another car because I'm not going to be able to drive a little stick-shift."

RB: Now, we worked very well here together in Hattiesburg.

JS: We did. Everybody did.

RB: SNCC, CORE. I remember [James] Farmer came here once, out of Brooklyn.

JS: He did.

RB: SNCC, CORE, SCLC, Student Non-Violent. That was King.

JS: Right. Julian Bond.

RB: And we married and became COFO and worked together.

JS: We had to unify because we were all doing the same thing.

RB: Yes. No point in being different. We needed to know where each other was.

JS: Jointly.

RB: When the spirit, our defensemen, needed to know where they needed to be.

EC: Who were some of the people that you worked most closely with in that context?

JS: All of them.

RB: All of them. Gosh, they were here--.

JS: They were in our homes and stuff because you didn't have integration. Like, when somebody came through, they were hungry, you had to go in there and cook for them.

RB: And there was no--. They couldn't go into anyplace. They couldn't go to hotels, they couldn't go to restaurants.

JS: You had to house them.

RB: Yes, you had to. I think Johnny May Walker. Pete Seeger slept on her floor.

JS: Sure did.

RB: John O'Neal, Southern Theater. [2:25:00] He did *Purlie Victorious* over at--.

JS: Mt. Zion.

RB: Mt. Zion. And when I went to New York and brought my children to New York, we went to Broadway to see *Purlie*. They called it *Purlie* on Broadway. We played--. I bought the long playing album. We played it until it had grooves in it, because it made us feel at home, because when they were just little, John O'Neal--I call him the Rooster--

moving on up? What was his name? Melba Moore, Cleavon Little, John O'Neal. The one that had the show on TV that, it was a--. *Maude* kicked off from it. *In the Heat of the Night* sheriff. O'Connor. Caroll O'Connor. But the guy--.

EC: Was he in *In the Heat of the Night*?

RB: Not--well, there were the movie stars. They usually never got past Jackson or the big cities.

JS: But they came here.

RB: Yes, some would--they would come here. But the *Purlie Victorious* that they did--. Meathead. He called his son-in-law Meathead.

M1: [Inaudible.]

EC: Oh no, *All in the Family*?

RB: No. *All in the Family* called his son-in-law Meathead. But the Jeffersons that lived--*The Jeffersons*. What was the guy that played Mr. Jefferson?

EC: Hemsley?

JS: Hemlsey?

RB: Something-Hemsley?

EC: Sherman?

RB: Sherman. Sherman Hemsley. He was one of those players.

EC: He was part of the Free Southern Theater?

RB: And did *Purlie Victorious* right here in Hattiesburg. Yes.

EC: I didn't know that.

RB: Yes.

JS: That's amazing, like Dick Gregory.

RB: Oh yes, Dick Gregory would come. I'll never forget hearing Peter, Paul and Mary sing in 1963.

EC: At the March on Washington?

RB: Yes.

EC: Yes.

RB: They did not come here, but Aaron Henry used to recite many of their songs. How many miles must a man walk down. How many white doves. He would recite it.

JS: Dr. Henry was very a very religious man.

RB: Before Charles Evers and Medgar--. No, Roy used to come. He was national. Roy Wilkins was national.

JS: He's been in my home, with Higginbotham.

RB: Judge Higginbotham, yes. Judge Higginbotham was our guest speaker at the Forrest Hotel. That was the first time we had ever gone to the Forrest Hotel. My mother worked as a chambermaid at Forrest Hotel before we left, when I was just a wee baby.

JS: I remember that well. It's just so many barriers that we've broken down. I'm just so glad that God put me here during this period where I could be a part of change.

RB: And yet, we've remained the same.

JS: Right.

RB: Our schools are segregated. I did not think--. I really felt that if we sent our children to school, that they would teach them the same, but they don't. They still don't. There could be twenty students. If half of them are one thing and the other half the other,

some are going to get it because it's done in their--a way that they understand it. The others are not going to get it, and that's because of those different cultures. You have to be cultural when you're teaching, and you have to do it in three different ways for people to remember. I can't think--. I think we have one--no, we have two whites in our band at Hattiesburg High. Two. That's pitiful. [2:30:00] One of those goes to the same church I do.

Before I even joined the church, we had a luncheon and they were discussing moving West. And I listened, because I really didn't know anything about anybody there. I didn't know who was rich, who wasn't rich, who was--. I knew the doctors because I worked at the hospital. And I told them. They were going to build a separate building out west for their children. And I said, "Now, I hear all these stories. Your grandmother, it was Methodist of the South." United--it wasn't United. It was Methodist Church of the South. "Your grandmothers got married here, your mothers got married here. Your babies were baptized, you were baptized here." I said, "Now, if you build a building out there for your children and they're going to have their youth church and all that out there, they're not going to feel the same about this building. So, if you plan to move, you might as well build a church out there and go on and be honest." And they decided to stay.

And I've been there almost twenty years, eighteen years or more. Twenty. And the same, you know. Some people left, but we're right back. Churches aren't as segregated. We have some people of color. And the one thing about culture that I don't like that we do, churches do, they'll have--. We have one church where the Baptists meet during the day and the Chinese meet at night. How about everybody come at the same time so the Chinese can

learn English faster, you can learn some Chinese maybe, and you're American. I don't believe in the separateness.

When the Spanish came, mostly Mexicans after Katrina, and Red Cross was giving away money, you know they showed up like white on rice. And, there would be eight or nine sleeping on the floor without a sheet in order to be in place to get money from Red Cross. It made me go to work for Red Cross, and I worked for Red Cross long enough to get some retirement out of it. But, I just don't believe in separateness.

If I'm in your home, I'm going to eat what you cook, and I expect you to do the same in my home. Now, if it's something you really don't like, or you're allergic, or you just can't stand it, I can't eat bloody octopus. I can't get it past my nose. I can't eat horsemeat sushi. That horse smell, I could smell that horse. I can't eat it. But I can eat all the other sushi. And when I'm in Japan or Germany, I try to speak what little language I can.

But, love, as Jeannette says, love takes all of those differences away. And some things have happened to me that is, some people might say supernatural, and I don't even know how it happened. But I was in Bolivia one year, and the preacher was preaching in—he was praying in-- Aymara, and we were all a group and we were holding hands. And we all understood what he was saying. And after he finished the prayer, we all said amen, we looked at each other and I said to my husband, "Did you understand what he said?" He said, "Yes, did you understand him?" I said "Yeah." And we started asking, and we all understood what he was saying and he was speaking in Aymara. So, love-- If we loved each other, we don't love each other. Even our creed says race. So, if you say race to me,

that means you believe in different races. So, what--. How can Mexican be a race? It's [2:25:00] a--. You know, they speak Spanish.

JS: It's a culture.

RB: That's a culture. That's a cultural thing. So you isolate it and you learn the dialect of Spanish, and then when the Spanish came over, just like when people from Africa were brought over here and enslaved. We were never slaves. I like that. I like that concept; we were never slaves. We were enslaved.

JS: You know, for me to accept myself and move on, when I know exactly who I am and what I am, when I got to that point in my life, I became a changed person, and I accept all the differences and I try to understand them, but I know that--

RB: Them you mean whites? Or do you mean anybody?

JS: Anybody.

RB: Okay.

JS: I'm talking about anybody, because I'm really not hung up on--.

RB: I'm not hung up on black and white, no.

JS: On white or black. I say white people, but I'm not really saying it in a derogatory term, because I really don't have any problems loving anyone, and I've always been that way.

EC: I have more questions, but I think this is actually a really good moment to stop.

RB: Okay.

Female 1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF RECORDING

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