

*Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2015*

Interviewee: Frankye Adams-Johnson

Interview Date: December 6, 2015

Location: Jackson, Mississippi

Interviewer: Emilye Crosby

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: approximately 1 hour, 28 minutes

START OF RECORDING

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

JOHN BISHOP: OK, we are rolling.

EMILY CROSBY: This is Emily Crosby with Mrs. Frankye Adams-Johnson, December 6, 2015, in Jackson, Mississippi. We're here with the Civil Rights History Project, co-sponsored by the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. John Bishop is also here, doing the recording. Thank you very much for doing the interview with us. Can you tell me when and where you were born, and about your family?

FRANKYE ADAMS-JOHNSON: I was born in a little town called Pocahontas, Mississippi. It's about fifteen minutes north of here, nine miles. It's north of here, up 49 Highway. I was born there into a family of sharecroppers. So I lived there, in Pocahontas, Mississippi, grew up there, until I was about twelve years old and my folks

moved to Jackson, Mississippi.

EC: What precipitated their move to Jackson?

FAJ: Just a hard life of sharecropping by our parents. Divorced, separated. I'm the daughter of four girls, born into a first marriage of a Merchant and Adams. My mother was a Merchant and my daddy is an Adams. Pretty much during my upbringing in Pochontas, Mississippi, I was raised by my mom, and the village, really. My mom, my grandparents, my great-grandparents. Just the rigor of sharecropping and being a single parent. My mother pretty much was tired of that sharecropping life. She was a domestic worker. So she wrapped her children up and moved us to Jackson, Mississippi.

EC: What kind of work did she do in Jackson?

FAJ: She actually started out as a domestic worker here in Jackson, but she remarried, and for the first time, she was a homeowner, became a homeowner here.

EC: She must have liked that.

FAJ: She did like that. That was liberating for her. It was liberating for her, because it actually landed her in a position of being one of the--. In terms of a local business, my mother, she ran a mom-and-pop store and turned it into a booming business here in Jackson.

EC: What was it like for you? How old were you when you moved to Jackson?

FAJ: I think I was about twelve, between twelve and fifteen. I would have to go back and relatively during that period.

EC: Sort of around the early teen years?

FAJ: Around my early teen years.

EC: What was it like for you to move to Jackson?

FAJ: It was really interesting. It was depressing. I grew up, and I actually liked the freedom of the rural offered, and when we got to Jackson, because my mother did not own property, so we had to move into a very cramped--up into a small apartment. It was kind of depressing. It took some adjustment to get used to the freedom of being able to just roam and run around in the woods and all of that stuff. I'm a nature girl. I love country living. I still do.

EC: I can appreciate that. What were your schools like?

FAJ: Which part? Pocahontas?

EC: Both of them, actually.

FAJ: Interesting. I did not know, I think until I got to be sixth grade--. I went to church schools when I lived in Pocahontas. I went to church schools from the time I entered school until fifth grade. I finished fifth grade at church school, and then we were bussed to a district school in Clinton, Mississippi. So I took the bus to Clinton. It was really interesting growing up in Pocahontas. I know you hear a lot about how bad and how terrible and how things were. I actually enjoyed my schooling in Pocahontas, because I grew up in--. Pocahontas was like a village. So I guess growing up for me was quite different.

As it relates to schooling, once we started bussing, [5:00] having to take the bus to school, there were times when I really could not go to school, during the harvest season, or during the planting season, and we had to stay out of school and help with the crops. Those, I think, was my first realization of what it meant to be black and poor, and what it

meant to be a sharecropper. The times that we could go to school, I truly enjoyed going to school, and the camaraderie of other students.

EC: When you had to stay home and work and miss school, you said that's your first realization?

FAJ: That was kind of a first realization of what it meant to be black and poor, growing up black and poor. I began to wonder about why it was, because--. And going to school. Actually, before I went to district school, where we had to take the bus to school, we had to walk to one of the church schools that I attended. My mom was constantly moving, too, because we were sharecroppers, so we lived on different plantations. On one of those plantations, to get to the church school that I attended, we had to walk to town, through town. Basically, Pocahontas is a very small place, so there's a little strip of paved streets where whites live. We had to pass through the town, and the paved streets, and walk the paved streets to get to our church school. I think those kind of experiences, because basically growing up, rarely did I get to see--. We knew that there were others, and that other people were not good people, and that's how I kind of grew up, knowing that there was a white world and there was a black world. But in terms of really knowing, I hadn't experienced what that world was like. We were pretty much protected from that world. I think having to walk through to town, and walk to our house, soon the realization of difference and what it meant to be black and poor began to hit me, and cause me to wonder a lot. Because I grew up in a religious environment also, and so one of the things it caused me to wonder about was God. I had an active imagination, so I would wonder about things. We had imagery, so what God

must like, but all those images was that He was a white God. If He was a white God, and then these people who didn't like black like me, then how could He possibly like me? So it was those kinds of things growing up, in terms of differences and racial issues. It wasn't until about 1954 when Emmett Till got killed, was murdered. Just from my parents and the fear that prevailed in our community, really made me start wondering. We started to talk about what happened, but we never really knew that there was this little boy, about our age, who had gotten killed. Our parents were so very, very frightened for us. I think issues of race and racial consciousness began to form in my head during that time.

The schooling is what you asked about. I think just particularly having to stay out of school, probably because education was, in the black communities, always stressed. My parents, my great-grandmother, taught us before I even went to the schoolhouse. My great-grandmother, my blind great-grandmother, had taught me my alphabet and how to count. So schooling was always important to me, because of what was encouraged and stressed as a family. So having to not be able to attend school during certain periods, it really left a lasting impression on me in terms of why did we have to stay out of school.

EC: Did your mother or anyone else actually talk to you about it, or were you just sort of overhearing these things?

FAJ: They never talked about things. [10:00] Things weren't talked about so much in our household. I heard a lot of stuff from sitting around, of sitting under the quilting frame, actually, because I was quite nosy. [Laughter] So I would hear--. Particularly the ladies would sit around the quilting frame. I don't know if you--. Well,

you should, because your mom just sold. The quilting frame, you know what that is.

EC: It's sort of raised up?

FAJ: Yeah, it's raised up, and a group of women would sit around the quilting frame. You could hear all kinds of stories when they were sitting around the quilting frame. I heard stories about the people who lived on that white strip, with the houses, the white houses and the picket fence. Most of our parents, particularly the women, worked in those houses. I would hear really crazy, wild stories about, you know, how mean some of those people. Worrying about my parents. I saw that movie, *The Help*, I said, "Ah, I'm real familiar with that, because I've heard those kind of stories with my parents." And some experience when my mother worked as a domestic in one of those houses. I do recall going to visit with her. We would always have to go to the back door, and she would sneak us food out of the back door. We never could go into those houses. Those kind of things began to make impressions on me, and the question of why.

EC: What was your schooling like when you moved to Jackson?

FAJ: When I moved to Jackson, the neighborhood that I lived in, there were three black high schools in Jackson. I actually started high school when we moved to Jackson, so probably when you ask me about this transition from junior high to high school-- I actually went to the newest of the three black high schools, which was Sam M. Brinkley. It was interesting, because it was the newest of the black high schools, and it kind of had the top-of-the-art equipment. I think I was still using used books, but there were a lot of things that that school offered that the two older schools did not offer, and that was-- My high school years were some of the richest. It was my richest experience

because of the activities that the school did offer.

Right up until the Freedom Riders came--. Once I began school here, then life--. Missing the freedom of Pocahontas and the freedom of running around. Once I began school here, then I began to really get into liking Jackson a little bit more. It was school life that really got me to really like my experience here in Jackson. It was during that time, though, I think probably a year after we moved here, I believe, was the Freedom Riders, because I think mom moved us here, in Jackson, probably about [19]59. The Freedom Riders came, and that's when things began to shift for me. I realized things were happening in Jackson. One of my classmate's father was an NAACP man. A lot of things were happening here in Jackson. Again, it was not talked about. My parents still didn't talk about things to us, but there was--.

EC: Were you talking to your classmates about it?

FAJ: Well, what happened is that--.

EC: Let me ask--. I'm sorry, let me interrupt. So you're about a sophomore in high school when the Freedom Rides come, something like that? Is that right?

FAJ: Yes, yes.

EC: OK, sorry to interrupt.

FAJ: I remember our course was government--I believe it was government-- began to shift in terms of what we were being taught, and new things, very unfamiliar to me, a word "communism." I was clueless to what that word meant. () I suppose the schools must have mandated their instructors to talk about what was going on, but in a negative light, to deter us from getting involved. I wanted to know what that word

meant. [15:00] The lesson was anti-communism. I wanted to know, so I asked my god-brother, whose daddy was very active in the NAACP. He began to tell me about the Freedom Riders and things that were going on here in Mississippi. I wanted to know more and more and more, so I started going to--. They would have meetings at his father's--. The NAACP would have meetings at his father's house. So I started going to those meetings with him. I got to meet Medgar Evers eventually. I'd go into mass meetings. This was about [19]62 when I started, and [19]63--.

EC: Can you step back, and can you describe what it's like for you as a high school student to be sitting in on these meetings of the NAACP? Can you give us a picture of that?

FAJ: Yeah. I tell you, I would sit. I'll tell you one of the most impressive. It was the singing, I think, that really got me. Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer was probably--. Would always--. Because I would always--. I was just so anxious, because it was always such--. There was always excitement, so that's what I felt then, a sense of excitement. People would talk about the things that were so unfamiliar to me, but I always tried to get a front-row seat so that I could hear Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer sing. I loved to hear her sing, so I would sit there, and just kind of sit there and gaze, like a starry-eyed kid who wanted to just want to because I didn't know any other woman like that. I mean, I was raised around women pretty much. I was raised around my grandparents, my grandmothers, and my great-grand-mom, but this was a different type of woman. I would sit there, a starry-eyed kid, and I remember thinking how I wanted to be like that woman there. It was Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer, Ms. Annie DeVine, and Ms. Victoria Gray. Those were the three

women that would just kind of impress me as this young woman. It was like, wow.

EC: Were they running for Congress then?

FAJ: I don't--.

EC: Sorry, I didn't mean to speak over you.

FAJ: Not during that time. When was it? Maybe into [19]64, around that--.

EC: Sixty-five is when they actually ran. So this is before then.

FAJ: This was before then. As I said, I started going to mass meetings in about [19]62. And [1963] was when I became really--. My first act of courage came in [19]63, that the Tougaloo College students, the Tougaloo Nine. They had to try to integrate. I was meeting these college students. One lived in our neighborhood, one of the persons who was involved in the Woolworth sit-in. She lived in my neighborhood, and she was also one of the youth leaders. At this point, I had joined the Jackson Youth Council that Medgar Evers started up--the North Jackson Youth Council. Pearlina Lewis was a member--. Actually, she was not a member of our church, but she lived in our neighborhood, and we occasionally went to the same church. She was one of the Tougaloo students who sat in at the Woolworth. May 31, 1963 was the first actual march. I spoke to you about the fairground. This is leading up to the fairground. I knew that Cleveland, my god-brother who had introduced me to pretty much the movement and what all of this meant, had gotten me involved in that and helped organize the students--. Woolworth on May 28th, I believe. It was about three days before we marched. We were marching in response to the brutal attack on the Tougaloo students, Anne Moody and Joan Trumpauer, that day that they had gotten beat up there, so Medgar had organized the

high school students [20:00] to protest.

I had no clue of what this was like, except that I was really excited about it. Even though the students had gotten brutally attacked during the lunch counter, I had no clue of what might happen to us. I was just a teenager who was eager to be a part of something what proceeded when we organized. It was very well-organized at the three black high schools with walk-out. Students would walk out of Jim Hill. Jim Hill is west. Brinkley is North Jackson. I guess you'd say Lanier is kind of central. We would converge. We would march downtown. But we never got any farther. We got about a quarter of a mile from our school, and what happened there was just like--. It was something like, I guess, out of a *Twilight Zone* or something. All the sudden, we were just converged on by all of these--the Thompson tank. It was just trucks, and garbage trucks, and whatever vehicles, just came in, and surrounded by all of these police with guns and hammers, and it was just, like I say, something that you see out of a *Twilight Zone* or something. I don't know that anybody prepped us. I'm trying to remember were we ever prepped. I don't know that we were ever prepped. Maybe we were. We were probably just young people not paying attention. We're going to go and we're going to march. That's all I knew, we were going to march.

But what happened after was--. And being taken to the fairground. I don't know if anyone told you the story of the fairground, where they housed us. And it really felt like--. Later on, I did liken it to a concentration camp, and Medgar also likened it to--. I was reading some of his stuff, and he also likened it to a concentration camp. Once I realized what a concentration camp was, I said, ah, we were treated like that. We were

put in where the livestock are kept during the fair. Just concrete floor. No cots, no anything. That night, when you were talking about Worth, we're talking about forming this circle, because it did feel dangerous. It felt dangerous to be surrounded by so many men and so many--. At that time, there were no black officers, so you got really red, big-faced-looking white guys with guns cocking. That's the way they kind of walked around, with their guns kind of cocked. I think I saw something like that when I saw the movie *Sarafina!* They walked around and they guided us with guns, and they said very nasty things, and tried to set fear in us. The guys formed a circle to protect the girls. That was basically the way we had to protect ourselves, was to kind of ban together and enclose each other in this circle.

EC: What was your god-brother's last name?

FAJ: Donald. Cleveland Donald. He's now deceased, but really, he was very active. Eventually, he became the--.

EC: Did he go to Ole Miss?

FAJ: One of the youth leaders. Yes, he was the third. James Meredith was the first black man to attend Ole Miss. Then Cleave McDowell--. Cleve McDonnell--. McDonnell, I believe it was. Of course, he got expelled, because they found a gun, so he was still in (). Cleveland was the second, because Meredith had completed Ole Miss, and Cleveland was the second to--.

EC: And he was your god-brother?

FAJ: He's my god-brother.

EC: So he was one of your important connections, then, to the NAACP?

FAJ: He was the connection. He was my most important connection to the movement, because I was clueless, because my parents just--. Basically, I heard stories about [25:00] how bad things were for black people, but never did they talk about it, either, and encourage me to get involved in anything. As a matter of fact, once I became very involved--. It was after the march, of course. There were several other marches. That became, for me, particularly the summer of [19]63, became my summer. My summer job was marching and protesting, pretty much. I lived each day to get up and go to head down to the Masonic temple to wait for my marching orders, whether we had to march, or whether it was to pass out fliers. Medgar got assassinated shortly after my first march. Medgar got assassinated. June was my first march. Medgar got assassinated shortly after that. Once Medgar got assassinated, I began to feel the seriousness of what it meant to be at civil rights, to be a marcher, or to be a freedom fighter, because freedom fighters was how we saw ourselves. What it really meant to be a freedom fighter, and that it was dangerous being this, but even with it being dangerous being it's the fever of having--. I think I got the marching bug and the freedom bug.

The word "freedom," which always, for me, seemed that I was born with a sense of freedom. I've always had this sense that I never wanted to be confined, I never wanted to be beat upon. I would run away a lot to avoid whippings when I grew up in Pocahontas. I would go into the woods to avoid rather. So that freedom--it just rang. There's something about that word that just rang something special to my soul. The interesting thing about it, in terms of--. On one of those marches, I got hit across my back. That was the one after Medgar, when Medgar--. They had Medgar's funeral. I

was in jail. Many of us were in jail, because there was a march staged right after Medgar's assassination, the next day after Medgar's assassination, I believe Dennis organized this march. It was really emotionally charged. It was a real emotionally-charged march. A lot of us marched that day. On that particular day, that was the day that I did get hit across my back. I had gotten accustomed to marching and demonstrating, and so I was carrying my writing pad with me, something to write on. This particularly day, we were sitting after they had--. Because by this time, you know that if you march, you were going to get arrested. No question about it. If you marched, you were going to get arrested.

On this particular day, we marched, and I had my writing pad, and I was sitting in the paddy wagon. It was very, very hot. Very, very hot. I was fanning with my writing pad, and I dropped it on the ground. Very naively, I did ask the officer if he would pass it to me. He just looked at me. I just jumped down to pick it up. As I got back into the paddy wagon, he went *whack* across my back. Then he cocked his gun. On that day, I think I realized that it became questionable about whether I really was not violent, because I wanted to fight back, and I was going to fight back. I went to fight back at him, and some of the other marchers grabbed me and said, "No, no, no, he's got a gun, and he's cocked his gun." So they pulled me back up into the paddy wagon

What really infuriated me more about that than anything else. Is that I had defied my grandfather. We're talking about freedom. My grandfather was a tyrant. He believed in beating, just some () sometimes. I had defied him, in defending myself against him, and had actually violated a sacred rule that you don't talk back to your elders, [30:00] and

you wouldn't dare dream of hitting him. But I actually had defied the only man. I had never been hit by a man. I had never been hit by a man, and the first man that hit me was a white Southern police officer. So that thing really was a turning point, that hitting, right after Medgar's assassination, and it all began to really--. The seriousness and the violence and all of that really began to affect me. I think that's when my anger began to set in, and I began to kind of suppress it, because we couldn't fight back. I just stayed angry. After I was hit across my back, I stayed angry. I wanted to fight back. I wanted some kind of sense of justice. I think the fact that I had defied my own grandfather, and here I am now, I can't defy this man. I can't defy the system. I have to stand true to this nonviolent policy.

EC: Did people talk a lot about nonviolence, or did you go to any workshops?

FAJ: I went to workshops where they trained us. As a matter of fact, one of the persons, Jesse Harris--he's recently passed--he was basically our trainer. They were training us down there at the COFO office. We got a lot of training. Some of the SNCC people. After Medgar's assassination, the young people here in Jackson particularly felt a void in our life, because Medgar was not there to lead and guide us and give us a sense of direction. Then there was the SNCC people at the COFO office, but most of the SNCC activities, much of the SNCC activities, were either in Macon or Greenwood. Jesse Harris, I think, somehow was put in as a lead person for the young people here in Jackson, Jesse Harris, Dave Dennis.

Many of the young people that were marching, during the time that Medgar lived, now were just kind of at a loss of where do we go and what do we do and who really

cares about us, really? Because Medgar was that kind of a person for me. He was kind of like a loving father, since I didn't grow up with a father around me. That became my idea of what it was like to have a father, because he had that kind of caring about--.

Before we went out on the street to march, Medgar would always prep us, and Medgar was always concerned, particularly once we got arrested. At mass meetings, he would always plea with the older people, "You've got to get those young people out of jail. The danger that they're in. We can't let them stay there." He was that kind of a caring, older person, so many of the young people just kind of faded out. Many of the young people that were going regularly on marches just kind of faded out, but Cleveland and I and a few others, we stayed through the summer. The summer of [19]64 came, and I went to Tougaloo College.

EC: Can I ask you a couple other questions first before we go onto that? I've heard about the march on the day of Medgar Evers's funeral. I think that must have been when you're arrested. People have described this sort of fight or conflict between the march and the police. Were you there in the middle of that?

FAJ: Yes, yes, yes, yes. I think it was probably one of the first times that I actually saw the dogs and the water hose and all those things that you see in *Eyes on the Prize*. When I see it--and I think they focus a lot in *Eyes on the Prize* on what happened in Alabama, with the little ()--but those kind of things were actually happening right--. If I remember that march, we started there at the Masonic temple, point of march, and so we came from there to downtown. I remember, almost vividly, because in that [35:00] route, it seems that the white Masonic temple was somewhere along there. It was

very, very furious, the dogs and the--. I don't know, because one of those marches, I remember Martin getting--. I don't know if it was the Meredith march, but I do remember Martin getting beat at one of those marches.

EC: How did your mother and your other family members react to you being in the movement?

FAJ: Oh, my mother. My mother would go off to work, and I would just kind of sneak out of the house, because she would tell me, "I don't want you going back down there in that mess." She would call it "that mess." "I don't want you going back. You need to stay out of that." No wonder she feared, because a woman that she worked for threatened my brother. Out of our family, my brother and I were the marchers from our family. The woman that my mom worked for actually did--. She came to pick him up from the fairground, and so the woman told him that she would personally beat him if he got back into going to these marches.

EC: So she was willing to bail him out, but then she's--.

FAJ: Well, they were, if you were at the fairgrounds they would just release you.

EC: They just released you?

FAJ: Yeah.

EC: But it was your mother's employer that came to get him?

FAJ: Yes, my mother's employer brought my mother to get him.

EC: Because she had a car? Oh, OK.

FAJ: So she threatened him that she would beat him personally. Beat him, he helped of course he helped, because he thought that my mom should have stood up. Of

course, being young, we didn't realize the fear and the repercussion that our parents were up against. So he stayed pretty angry, and I think I did too, because I was like, how could she let that white woman talk to my brother like that? For a long time, my mom, there wasn't much she could do. She could beat me, but she never did. She just threatened me. "If you get back out there again--." She was more upset because she blamed me for--.

The first time we marched, they did not discriminate the marchers and the spectators, so they just rounded all the children up. Before she died, she would tell the story about how the maid--. When the white folks weren't around, they would try to sneak a call (). How they would fear they were going to lose their jobs. That first night, my mom-- brother--there were four of us still home. My brother and my two younger siblings had gotten just pulled in. My brother and I, we were part of the organized march, but a lot of the young kids were on the sideline watching, because my younger brother and my younger sister were still in junior high school. The Brinkley was junior and senior high. We were in high school, and the youngest was still in junior high. Of course, the junior high school kids were not a part of the march, but many of them did get pulled in. Basically, that first night, they identified, "You, you're going to stay here, because you organized it." So they kind of identified the people that they thought were the leaders, and they kept us there.

EC: Was that after the Tougaloo Nine?

FAJ: Yeah, that was after the Tougaloo Nine.

EC: Did they use the tear gas that day?

FAJ: They did. They surely did, as a matter of fact. It was terrible. It was the

dogs. It was the water. I remember tear gas more on Lynch Street, the tear gas. I don't know if there was tear gas, but I do remember the water and the dogs. I remember that really clearly. I remember the dogs rearing up, really clearly.

EC: Did you know any of the older, college-aged students, like Colia Liddell and Dory and--.

FAJ: Yes. I met all of those people when I went to Tougaloo. I went to Tougaloo. That's where we had it. In 1964, I went to Tougaloo on a musical scholarship. I went to Tougaloo College. Because I had spent the summer of [19]63 just being entrenched in the movement. [40:00] I went there, and that was the summer of [19]64 when I went there. It was Freedom Summer. I remember going there. I went there as a pre-freshman. Because I was so entrenched with the movement--. Of course, it was the Freedom Summer, and all the people there were there on campus. That's how I got involved as a SNCC worker, because I was already involved in the movement, had gotten involved in the movement. I met all the SNCC people when I went to Tougaloo College. I met Joyce and Dory, all of them.

What was it like to get out to Tougaloo--you'd been in the movement--but Tougaloo, and meet all these older people and these full-time activists?

FAJ: It was very, very challenging in the sense that a lot of the older people didn't treat us with the same kind of respect. We couldn't travel, every now-- I think when Stokely came, Stokely took us under his wing, and I ended up going to Greenwood to do voter registration work when Stokely came there. But being at Tougaloo, one of the things that connected us, and those of us who--. There were about six young women all

together, six of us, who had-- Well, one of the persons that was my friend, became my friend during the pre-freshman program, her mother, Mrs. Annie DeVine, daughter and I were in school. We were in the pre-freshman program together. She was the daughter of Mrs. Annie DeVine, so that gave us some sense of importance as it relates to being a part of the movement. But we weren't necessarily free to-- First of all, they knew the danger of it, so they weren't trying to just take people, young kids, off somewhere and expose them to the danger of movement life. We had tutors from Brown University, and that kind of helped us to get more involved, having those tutors from Brown, because they were also part of the activities that were going on there on campus.

One of the biggest challenges that I had is that I was so involved in my whole being at Tougaloo College was-- Supposedly I was there for the pre-freshman program. That's what got me there. But because I had been so active in the movement, it had just become a part of my life, and so I would spend much of my time just being up under the Freedom Riders, or just being up under the SNCC workers. I actually got kicked out of the program, because the woman who headed up the pre-freshman program was very, very conservative, and she told me I could not come back to the program. I think I'd start doing stuff. My mother has always had an open-door policy. We could always bring people home. At this time, now I'm beginning to bring white people to the house. That's when my mom was like, oh, no, no, no, no, no. She called me aside. I was just used to always-- As we were growing up, my mother always had an open-door policy. We could always bring children to our house, and she was always feeding people. I just felt, oh, I'm going to take my newfound friends to the house. So I took her there. I took my

newfound white friends to the house. My mother told me straight up. She called me aside and she said, "They're not going to have it, and I'm not going to have it. You are really putting us in danger here." She was like, "That is dangerous business you're doing. You cannot bring those people back here to this house."

EC: How did you feel?

FAJ: I felt just confused. I really did. Because still, right now, I'm still not (). What I felt, oh, wow, that segregation had--. Once I got to Tougaloo, because it was a nice mixture--. One, it was my first time ever being around white people in terms of really a close-up intimacy, and the white students that were there at Tougaloo did not treat me any different. I guess because I did not personally know--. Well, except there had been the time that I was hit across my back. I knew what it was like [45:00] to be hit by someone that was so filled with hate. But I did not judge. I thought, well, all white folks are not bad. Here are some good white folks. I didn't understand my mom, like what's wrong? You're acting like these people. It wasn't until I got older and now I can analyze things and understood why my mom acted a certain way. It was fear. You could get killed. Not only could you get killed, you could cause this whole family to get killed. So I think I did not know--. I just wanted my mom to be a freedom fighter. I wanted my mom to embrace the movement.

EC: Can you tell us what Mrs. DeVine was like? She's one of those Mississippi movement heroes, but I don't think very many people around the country know about her.

FAJ: Mrs. DeVine was very quiet, but Mrs. DeVine, the three of them that I'm

going to talk about when I talk about Mrs. DeVine and three they were just fearless women, but she was the quieter one out of all the three, Ms. Victoria and Ms. Annie DeVine and Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer. Ms. DeVine was the quieter one of them. I remember her as being very, very quiet. Very quiet. Fierce worker, but very quiet. I tried to get her daughter, Barbara, to talk about her mom more, and to maybe write about her mom.

EC: That would be wonderful.

FAJ: Because out of the three of them, I guess she was the quieter one.

EC: I don't think she's as well known.

FAJ: No, she's not. As I say, I know from those three women, they were always together. They were always together. Wonderful organizers.

EC: So you got kicked out of the pre-freshman program. Did you still enroll in Tougaloo in the fall?

FAJ: Yeah, they allowed me to come back in the fall. I got kicked out of the program, but I was able to come back to the fall. It was really interesting. Tougaloo is known as the hotbed of the Civil Rights Movement, but then everybody at Tougaloo was not necessarily progressive. I remember when the director, Dr. Townsend-- Really interesting, because you have students who have mixtures of opinions about her, but I think she was one of those type of people that she just wanted to count to ten. She wanted well-behaved students. You're here for this, and all of that stuff there is not why you're here. She kind of alluded to that when she kicked me out of the program. She did say, "You're spending too much time involved with those people." All the people at

Tougaloo--. Well, Tougaloo is the hotbed of the movement, but everyone at Tougaloo did not necessarily--. Even my choir director. Now that I've met Joyce and all of the women, I wanted to be regular looking like them. So when I went back during the fall semester, I wanted to take on this character, what it meant to be a Civil Rights or a SNCC worker. The ladies, the girls, were wearing overalls and they were knotting their hair up, napping up their hair. I was there on a musical scholarship, and so my choir director, who was also a very conservative, great, wonderful choir director--one of the greatest here--was not particularly interested in movement activities. Whenever we had to perform, he would pull me aside and say, "Now, young lady, you're going to have to straighten that hair." I could never wear my hair natural when we would perform.

You had that kind of mixture there at Tougaloo. You had the Borinski types who would embrace social change and encourage us in sociology classes, and talked about social issues. You had the Borinskis, but then you had the Townsends, you had the Pops Lovelace, and you also had--. I remember one time, we actually protested on the president's [50:00] lawn, President George Owens. He was very conservative. But interesting enough, he did keep up with all that went on as it relates to the movement. I had an opportunity when I moved back here to do some volunteer work at the archive, and I had an opportunity to work on his papers. He had such a rich collection of all the activities that were going on, and I actually--. Reading his files, organizing his papers. I actually got to read a lot of the details of things that I had missed from just being out there, being an activist, and not knowing all the details of everything--.

EC: I would think that would be very interesting.

FAJ: What?

EC: To be able to read those things ().

FAJ: It was. I would sit there, just when we were processing his papers. I would just sit there and I would say, "Wow." This really conservative president kept these really rich files on all of the Civil Rights activities.

EC: You said that you had met Joyce Ladner and some of the other women in SNCC, and you wanted to look like them?

FAJ: Yeah, I wanted to look like them. The first thing I did was to--. I never got me overalls, but I surely said, "Well, at least I can knot my hair up." Yeah, they were my role models. I looked up to them, because they could get to do things, and when they went to--. Those were really sad times for me, because all of those big girls that were going places. They could go to Atlanta, they could go to Atlantic City, and the only thing that my mom did allow me to do was I did go to the March on Washington. I don't know how she allowed me to go to the March on Washington, but I actually did go to the March on Washington. That was an interesting experience.

EC: Yeah, tell us about that.

FAJ: That was an interesting experience. It was really interesting, when we left out of Jackson, to go to Washington. I remember, our first stop was in Meridian. We had our first stop in Meridian. When we were going out of Jackson, of course, we're still very segregated, so of course we went to the rest stop, and you went to the colored folks' side. We didn't even think of going to the white folks' side. But--.

EC: Was it a bus? Were you traveling on a bus?

FAJ: We were on a bus. About six busses left out of Jackson. They had the bus of ministers. I remember most of the ministers were on a bus, and then there were a bus that just carried us young people, and we had chaperones, of course. Once we got to Washington--. And of course, it was just so much excitement. It was just so much going on and so many people that, as a young person, you just felt like, I'm just happy to be a part of it. I remember that mostly it was like one big picnic for me. I remember sitting around the monument and putting my feet in the water, and just kind of hanging out and hearing all the speeches. But it was so exciting. I did feel like, for a young person like me, that we had, because was that my first--? That wasn't my first trip out of Mississippi, but it was the first trip that ever meant anything. It was so powerful just to be in this sea of people, just to be a part of the sea of people. I did feel a sense, in my young mind, that we had done something in Washington that, just by us going there, meant that things had changed, that we had changed Mississippi somehow.

So when we came back, and we were so fired up from all of that energy--. So when we came back, made that same stop in Meridian again, and this time we did not go on the colored folks' side. We decided that now it's time. We're going to integrate. So we just naturally went to the white side, to the restroom. I believe that bus stop then had a lunch counter there or so. I remember coming out of the restroom, and when we came out of the restroom, a fight had broken out. It was a group of young white--. They were on motorcycles. They'd come in, and they began [55:00] to attack the men. When that happened, we were like, "We're going to fight back. We just came from marching on Washington, and we're not going to take no more of this here." Once we came out of the

restaurant onto the outside, now, that's when we realized the whole town of whites had come out.

EC: Oh, wow.

FAJ: There was a mob. They had come out, and they actually were not in Klansmen uniform, but it was a planned mob. I remember they were all dressed in black. They were not in Klan uniform. What happened, the gang of thugs had initiated the attack, but then the mob began to throw things at us, and it was just crazy. The ministers got between us--. Because we were in a fight. We were like, "We aren't going to take--." At that point, it was like, "Enough of nonviolent. We're going to fight back." We were actually prepared to fight back. Well, I say prepared; we were tempted to fight back. The ministers got between us and the mob, and pleaded with us to please get back on the bus. So eventually, they got us quieted down, and we did get back on the bus. We were told by, I guess, the sheriff or whoever, that we demand a hearing, so we went to see the judge. So they told us to come back sometime. I'm trying to remember the days. It must have been when we got back. It must have been a weekend. So we went back the following week for a hearing. We were told then that the judge was going fishing. So () but nothing ever came of it.

FAJ: Before I left Mississippi. Medgar had gotten assassinated. Just in terms of right up front and close to things, deaths and the violence that affected my life. There was a young man here that got shot down, and witnessed that, on Lynch Street. I think after that--. And my mom actually began to get concerned, because I really was getting--. I was angry a lot. My brother and I and a group of kids, we would sometimes,

particularly after the March on Washington, and we came back--. Because that just stirred up a different kind of anger. Yes, this will not stop. We're going to continue to get beat up, and then we cannot fight back. That's what we were told. Once there--. I believe it was [19]67 when this Ben Brown got shot down here on Lynch Street. I don't know what the nature of that protest was, the details of it, but I do remember us marching on Lynch Street. I do remember that, by this time, the National Guard had been brought in for this demonstration. I think there was something going on with Jackson State. Connie and Benny had taken the bus. Tougaloo students had left to go to support the students, something that happened with students at Jackson State. Not when those two guys, Green and--.

EC: Right, it wasn't the anti-war?

FAJ: It wasn't that. Something else happened at Jackson State. Because Jackson State students were always being forbid--.

EC: Is that when somebody drove through the white--? When the whites would drive through the campus and injure students?

FAJ: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Ben Brown, this young black guy--. The National Guard had come out on this particular march here, this particular protest. It was a protest, right there on Lynch Street. In our training, someone had told us that the National Guard would not shoot unless fired upon. A lot of us, because of all the things that we were experiencing in terms of the brutality--this was after the Meredith march--we had began to do things that really could have [1:00:00] gotten us killed. Now I can say it, but then we were just young and angry. I think we were throwing something at them, and they

turned around and *pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop*. We were running into alleys and wherever we could run. At the end of that evening, Ben Brown had been killed by the National Guard.

EC: Did you know him?

FAJ: Just from one of the many kids that I knew from--. He wasn't from my neighborhood. He was from out there, in West Jackson, around the college. He lived around there. A lot of the kids, I did not necessarily know from all the other schools. We met up at the Masonic temple. We pretty much knew each other from there, but not personally. It was kind of after that that my mom, she really became very concerned. She wanted me to leave Mississippi, so I left. She called my older sister. Came for the summer. She said that I could go back with her to New York. Once I got to New York--.

EC: Is this about [19]67, [19]68?

FAJ: Yes, [19]67. Once I got to New York, I didn't know anything else other than the movement. I was disconnected, because I went to live with my sister, and my sister lived in the suburbs in New York. I started longing for this connection of movement. I started longing for that connection. In New York, what seemed to be going on, there was kind of a culture. They were more into getting into African culture and all that stuff. I started going to meetings from White Plains, New York into Manhattan, with the cultured nationalist group of women. Baraka. You might have heard the name Baraka. Baraka's wife and some of the others. So this is more culture--.

EC: Amina Baraka?

FAJ: Mm-hmm. I was used to being active, and grassroots organizing, and

getting up and doing things, and mostly this was an intellectual group of women, who basically did a lot of semantics. So not the kind of movement that I was accustomed to. Having gone to one of those meetings, I actually met a group of people on the streets of Harlem, 125th Street and 7th Avenue, with black leather ties on. I liked the language they were talking. I liked the zest. I liked the--. They were with the people, like I was accustomed to in Mississippi. I was impressed, and I inquired about who they were. I don't know that I had--I'm trying to remember--. I don't know if I'd ever heard of Black Panthers. This was probably [19]68. Yeah, this was maybe the spring of [19]68. Right, spring of [19]68. I wanted to be a part of that group of people. It seemed to be the thing that I was looking for to fulfill the void of not having movement activity in my life. They didn't have a branch of the Black Panther Party in White Plains, New York, so, at that time, to travel there. I was still young, and I didn't know much about getting around, taking trains. They asked me if I wanted to start a branch for the Black Panther Party in White Plains, New York. So then my life drastically began to change. They brought someone in from, I think, California, and they helped my sister and I to set up a branch of the Black Panther Party in New York. At this time, I--.

EC: So your sister was on board?

FAJ: She was on board. She was really on board. At this time, I was working. When I first went to New York, I started teaching at parochial school for children. Shortly after that, I started teaching at a daycare [1:05:00] center. I don't know, I think I thought that everyone was becoming conscious of this movement stuff, because that was just my world. So I started taking my Black Panther papers to work with me, and of

course that job didn't last. [Laughter]

EC: Not everybody was on board.

FAJ: Not everyone was on board with that. I started a liberation school with the young kids that I was working with at the daycare center. At the same time, a lot was going on in White Plains, and once I began to become politically conscious there in New York and look at the issues, it was different in that we were fighting a lot of segregation and that kind of stuff here, but what was happening there in New York is that black people were living very, very poorly, and there was urban--. What do they call it--? Urban renewal, then, at that time. That's what they call gentrification now. What it was, urban removal, because then black people were being moved from their homes and moved into tenement building. My sister's home, the home that we lived in, was one of those houses. That became an issue there in White Plains, and so I got very involved in that issue. The building that they had put us in after they took over our neighborhood. As a matter of fact, it's a shopping center there where we used to live now. They built a shopping center there in White Plains.

The high-rise building that they put us in, they had a daycare center there, so I began to set up my own--. No. There was a conflict of interest because I wanted to start a daycare center in the building that we lived in, and the agency that I worked with wanted those buildings. So that became a conflict. I got very involved in fighting against urban removal--urban renewal--there in White Plains. Eventually--. We've got to cut through some of the chase, my work with the Black Panthers. I was moved from--. Because of the organizing that I was doing there in White Plains, the central committee

moved me and wanted to place me where they considered was crucial to--. They moved me from White Plains and placed me in Brownsville, New York. Brownsville is one of the biggest ghettos, next to South Bronx. The two of them probably run neck-and-neck of being the biggest ghettos in the city. I was placed there. I was the officer of the day there, in Brooklyn.

EC: Can you explain what that means?

FAJ: What does--.

EC: You said officer of the--.

FAJ: Officer of the day means that you're pretty much in charge of all the activities that go on, and overseeing the office and the daily activities.

EC: I know people have very strong opinions in several different directions about what it was like to be a woman in the Panthers. What was your experience?

FAJ: What it was like there--. Yeah, the opinions do vary. I think, in New York, being a Panther woman in New York was a bit more liberating in that we truly did, that men there seemed to have a bit more respect for women leadership. Then when the California guys used to come through, they thought that when they came through, that it was OK to have socialistic sex, they'd call it. That was the California attitude, that yeah, they would come with socialistic sex. We weren't too down with that. But overall, in terms of decision-making, women did get to participate in decision-making, and women could hold office, such as the officer of the day, hold key positions.

Now, don't get me [1:10:00] wrong. People think that, I guess, it was just all the way equality. No, there was a lot of chauvinism. If you were a female and had a man to

protect you--. Because there was this attitude that we're socialists and we don't get hung up on the traditional way of relationships. It was definitely challenging to be a female when it came to sex, or when it came to families. When I look back in retrospect, I do think that we spent a lot of time serving the people, and kind of got lost along the way that our families were also part of the people. I eventually got married to a Panther. As a result of being married to a Panther man, many of us ended up single-parenting, because many of the Panther men ended up in jail. I also had my own challenges in terms of that life is--. That we did experience a lot of confrontation with law enforcement. As a result of that, many of us--. I'm probably one of the few women who actually survived a very turbulent experience, being a Panther woman, in that I actually did live underground for about four years, and I gave birth to my youngest daughter when I was on the run.

Looking back in retrospect, the Panthers is definitely very controversial. One, it's very controversial, but it's also--. You can't just put Panthers in a bag and say, "It was bad. It was good." So when I try to look at that experience, I try to look at what worked and what did not work. I think as families, it did not work well in terms of raising a family. I think it worked well in terms of challenging the system and looking at--. Much broader than just civil rights, and looking at human rights issues, and also solutions, that it had a solution to some of the problems, much more than the--. It had programs that really addressed the issues that really affected, which was housing. In urban cities, housing is a big problem.

What I realized growing up in Mississippi, though segregated as we were, and as hard as times, difficult as life might have been here, what I did not know was what it was

like to go hungry. So I learned that children go hungry, that children get bitten by rats, that children actually get roaches in their ears, and that these kind of things actually happen in this urban environment that I had to find myself in. That these are real issues that really happen, and that we had real programs to address those issues, and ways of insisting that--. One of the things that I think that I can appreciate about the Black Panthers is that pro wonderful things now that happens is free breakfast in schools were one of the programs that we initiated. We were the first to initiate such a program, and children had--. Because the whole concept was that children could not learn adequately if they're going to school hungry, which they were. We actually would round up children who actually did not have breakfast in the morning. We'd round them up and take them to the breakfast programs.

Actually, going back to what it was like to be a female, the women in the Black Panther Party is one of the big things that I do talk about a lot, in that many of us, particularly once we began to have families, we did suffer a lot in terms of having to raise, now, these children [1:15:00] on our own, and also having to be--. That oftentimes we were put in positions, like my going on the lam was a very dangerous and unsafe thing to do with a woman who's a mother. But it was kind of expected of us to be guerrilla woman and mother, too, at the same time, because we looked at models, the (), where women actually have babies on their back and the guns. So that became a romantic kind of notion, that we could actually do this, be revolutionary guerrilla and mother at the same time. Those were very challenging times.

I remember, because I did try to--. Once I began to have family, I wanted my

children to come first, and I remember, years later, a man, a brother in the Black Panther Party, said to me later on that he always thought I was one of those bougie-type sisters. I said, "Why would you think I was bougie?" He said, "Because you just always seemed to be about your children and stuff." It was those kinds of contradictions that I questioned. It was like, OK, so it's not OK to be a mother, it's not OK to say, "I just want to spend my time making sure that these children are safe." Now, you were asking-- . What was this question you just asked me?

EC: Oh, about what it was like to be underground.

FAJ: I'll tell you, I actually never thought I would--. I think the reality of being underground, and the reality of--. Actually, I've said in my life that there are two things that I have served my time for, and that is the experience that took me underground, and that it probably was one of the greatest mistakes that I made in terms of my movement activity, in terms of being a Panther woman. It was the turning point in my life, in the sense that I made a decision to do something--. To go against my better consciousness, that, "You shouldn't do this here. You should let someone else do this here. This is not for you to do. You have children." But I think being a female--again, back to female--it got down to a point, particularly after leaving the Black Panther Party where it was most challenging for women, because it was like being displaced of this place. Once the split, I didn't have the comfort again. It was like going from Mississippi to New York. I no longer had the break between my life as a civil rights activist, and what do I do with my life here in New York. And having joined the Black Panther Party, now very short-lived. We're talking about a very short-lived experience, because I joined the Black Panther

Party in [19]68, and in 1971, there is no longer an organized organization. So again, it's, what do I do with my life now? Movement has been my life now. We were just pulled, and just pulled in all kinds of directions.

I did come home to Mississippi in [19]71 to try to regroup, but the powers that be was not going to have that, because once I came home, I brought danger home to my family, as my mother would put it. That's the way my family felt about me, that I had brought danger. I didn't invite danger. Danger followed me here, because a female--. Again, if you're female, then you know what the system--. As far as the system is concerned, you know what's going on with these men folks. So danger followed me here to Mississippi. I stayed in Mississippi, but got uncomfortable, and I felt that, no, I don't want to expose my family to this. I don't want to expose all of the people that I've gone to school with, and are now exposed to the kind of COINTEL terrorism that was going on during that period. It wasn't so much anything that I had done. It was supposedly who I knew. That kind of pressure, I find myself back in New York. What followed that, I was just still feeling kind of displaced. [1:20:00] Movement is the life that I had known, and so what do I do? I did find myself gravitating to more of the radical wing of the split in the party. An incident in 1964 set me on the run.

EC: Seventy-four?

FAJ: Yes. It did send me on the run, but it was an incident in which my better judgment say, "Don't do that, because that's not for you. You have children." But, however, it did send me on the run. I had my baby underground. My baby daughter was born underground. I think having the child underground--. I had to go into a safe area

with a group of my births-- It was a group of white women, with underground people. I stayed there until I had my baby. Once I had my child, I had to make a decision now, so it was a turning point in my life. So I did have to make a decision that--. Because this is very, very dangerous, now. This is where life had really gotten dangerous in the sense that, wow, this is life-threatening danger, because now people that I'm with are getting killed. They're going away and they're not coming back. They're either going to jail or they're getting killed. What I eventually had to do was to just separate myself to protect myself. It was rough. To say the least, it was rough. I managed to get my children back with me. The two older ones were with family members, so I managed to get them back, because that was the most depressing thing that I had this experience, was to be separated, to have my children here and there and not with me. So I managed to get my children back together, and I managed to survive underground by networking and creating my own support system, in a sense.

I lived four years underground, and my children--. Knowing that my children would grow up not knowing their grandparents, or not being able to have a normal life like other children, all of that went into play in terms of me making a decision of how do I get myself out of this situation that I found myself in, and to really look at how bad the situation is, and what are my options. So I did. After four years of that life, I began to explore my options of clearing myself of the situation that landed me there. I did get a lawyer to look into it, so I was able to get myself clear of the situation with pretty much a little slap on the hand, pretty much, because it was not as bad of a situation as the Assata Shakur situation. None of that stuff happened. But it was a turbulent time for life,

because I had to always be looking over my shoulders. I never knew when the day that I might be gunned down. I never knew that the day might come that I might get arrested and torn from my children, and that was the kind of life that I had to live.

I remember, one day, going to the supermarket, and I saw some police officers, and I was like--. And they were looking at me. Then I was like, "This is the day." So it was that kind of life of always feeling that this is the day. That was four years of that. Then once I got myself cleared up, my husband ended up in the biggest mess. So I ended up doing--. Instead of the two years' probation that I had gotten, I ended up getting the whole five years because of that man they called my husband. That's what I was told. You had something else you were asking?

EC: I was just going to say, are there any final thoughts you have, or things that you would want young people or others to know about your work? Civil rights, human rights, in Mississippi with the Panthers. [1:25:00]

FAJ: Young people, I often try to tell them, "Stand up for something." That if you don't stand for something--. You know. I do try to encourage young people, but I also want them to think, because much of my involvement, particularly with the Panthers and stuff, had much to do with--. When we were an organized organization, I felt that that was something that gave me meaning and some fulfillment in my life, and that I was doing things that concretely could make a difference. And that yes, that if we are going to be here, since we are here on this earth, on this journey, that we should find something to make a difference, rather than just being, and to know what it is that you can do. What it is that you yourself can do to make a difference, and not blindly following. I think

that's one of the things I discourage, not to blindly follow. A lot of young people, particularly when it comes to the Panthers, a lot of young people want to know about the Panthers, but there's the romanticism. So basically, I want them to know the good, the bad, and the ugly. I advise young people, when studying the movement, to--. What I found is that now, even with doing this interview here, I'm wondering how much--. What do we tell people, that young people tend to think that we were just kind of born, that we did super things that's beyond--. I didn't know anything about politics when I--. But be open. Be open to new ideas. But to also find what really works for you.

EC: Thank you. Thank you very much. Appreciate you doing the interview.

F1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center on March 29, 2017