

Interview with **Myrlie Evers**

November 27, 1985

Interviewer: Orlando Bagwell

Production Team: A and B

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 362]

[sound roll 1327]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU BEGIN TO TELL ME, IN YOUR BEST WORD PICTURES, WHAT YOUR FEELING ABOUT YOUR—WHAT, WHAT YOU EXPERIENCED AS A KID. GIVE ME— EXPLAIN MISSISSIPPI TO ME. [pause] OK.

Evers: I grew up in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Vicksburg is quite well known for its battlefields and the battles that were fought there during the Civil War. My mother and father divorced when I was quite young and I was reared by my grandmother and my aunt, both who were school teachers, both pillars of Vicksburg society. And being pillars of Vicksburg society and teachers, meant that they did not question, at least, publicly question, the whole desegregated system in which we lived. I lived in, of course, a segregated section of town. It was on a hill, where everyone knew everyone. People were very protective of each other. We were all quite poor, but we didn't realize that we were. And my grandmother had a very large garden which we survived off of. Our neighbor next door had chickens someone else had geese, it was a very small, well knit community of black people, but the hardships were there. Hardships in terms of being able to get jobs and to make enough money to survive. And being school teachers, as my grandmother and my aunt were, was the epitome [coughs] of success in

Vicksburg society. My grandmother was perhaps a rarity insomuch that she went to Hampton Institute as a young girl, and you didn't find too many young black or negro or colored, as they were called then, people who went to college during, during that period of time. My aunt was a product of Tougaloo College and we think of Tougaloo in the sense of the major role that it played du—during the civil rights movement in Mississippi. Some of the things I remember most about my growing up in Mississippi, have to do with the whole desegregated system. I recall only too well how I had to walk miles past the white schools.

00:02:57:00

INTERVIEWER: OK LET ME STOP YOU FOR ONE SECOND.

Evers: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: NOW YOU, YOU'RE SAYING TO ME THAT YOU REMEMBER THE DESEGREGATED SYSTEM. IT WAS THE SEGREGATED SYSTEM.

Evers: Oh, God did I say? I'm sorry.

INTERVIEWER: LET'S STOP FOR A SECOND.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THAT'S OK.

00:03:06:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: WHAT YOU REMEMBER HURTS—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED.

00:03:09:00

[cut]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKER.

BAGWELL: OR WHETHER WHAT YOU REMEMBER COMES BACK AS A VERY LOVING KIND OF EXPERIENCE ABOUT YOUR STATE AND HOW—WHERE YOU LIVED?

Evers: Some of the things that I remember most about Vicksburg and, and the state of

Mississippi, growing up as a child, were some of the very bad effects that that segregated society had on me and certainly on others. I recall walking miles past a white school to go to the school that was reserved for coloreds, as we were called then. And a passing through that white neighborhood and having little small children who could barely walk, who could barely talk, run out and say, nigger, nigger, nigger. I recall feeling, then, an anger and a hurt and a frustration and I would ask my grandmother and my aunt, you know, why, why does this happen? You know, why, why do they call us those names? And in that day “nigger” and “black” were two very derogatory names and it's interesting how that, that shifted and changed particularly in, in the term black. But, they would tell me, sweetheart, that's the way it is, don't worry about it. What you have to do is to achieve your highest goals in this society. You know, you don't challenge the system, you rise to the very top within the bounds and limitations that they, meaning the politicians what-not, have, have given you in this society. I knew that that wasn't right. I felt it wasn't right, but I didn't know exactly what to do about it as a child. One of the other incidents that happened almost weekly were the times when we rode the city buses. Now for the most part when I was a child there were very few people who had a car, in Vicksburg, so we walked where we had to go or we rode the bus. And always, you had to be in those last couple of seats in the back. At one period there was even what we used to call a “chicken screen” the net that divided our two or three seats from the rest of the seats on the bus. Vicksburg is a very hilly city and it appeared to us, and it was certainly true, that the bus drivers would apply their brakes to make us all kind of fall back on each other. They would apply them suddenly. I can recall how we, as high school students, talked about that. The fact that we even stopped riding buses for a while out of protest—it certainly didn't help us, but that was our way, and of course, the officials in Vicksburg didn't care one way or the other because that was the only transportation that we had.

00:06:20:00

INTERVIEWER: THAT, THAT BUS SYSTEM, HOW DID IT MAKE YOU FEEL? I MEAN TALKING ABOUT THAT TO—

Evers: The bus system, the whole system, segregated system, made me angry it also—

INTERVIEWER: LET'S CUT. SORRY.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE SHOULD HOLD.

[cut]

00:06:44:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: ALL RIGHT. THINK OF SITTING BEHIND THE CHICKEN WIRE

AND BEING IN THE BACK OF THE BUS WHAT THAT MAKES YOU FEEL, HOW THAT FEELING KIND OF IGNITES A SORT OF RESPONSE TO ALL THE—

Evers: Sitting in the back of the bus in Vicksburg, really brought out a number of emotions that perhaps I wasn't even aware of at that particular time. I was aware of the anger. I was aware of the frustration of not knowing exactly what to do to change it and being frustrated because there seem to have been no effort on the adults to do anything about it. Also, living in that kind of society, having to walk miles past a school, being delegated to the back of the bus, has a tendency to make one feel inferior, even though you certainly fight that feeling. The, the system makes you feel inferior and you know yourself that you aren't, and, and there's that struggle wi—within yourself to, at least with me, to prove to myself and everybody else, that I wasn't inferior and search for some way to say to that system that indeed I was not. But as I said my family life was that where we're told not—I was told not to rock the boat. I moved, my grandmother and I moved into the house with my aunt, who lived in a very mixed block of houses, a couple of blocks. On one side there were the blacks and across the street there were the whites, but never the twain shall meet. I mean we, we simply did not cross the street to visit, to talk to each other. But as children, regardless of color, you come together and, and you do find some way of playing together. There was a little girl, a little white girl across the street from my aunt's house, and the two of us would, would go up the block a few feet and play where our parents couldn't, couldn't see us.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THAT'S A CUT TAKE. I'M SORRY.

[cut]

00:09:09:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

INTERVIEWER: —PLAYED TOGETHER FOR LONG TIME THEN ONE DAY YOUR PARENTS MUST HAVE BEEN TALKING AND THEN WE GET TO WHAT IT MADE YOU FEEL LIKE WHEN YOU FOUGHT—SHE CALLED YOU—

Evers: OK, so where do you, where do you want, do you want me to kind of do it again?

INTERVIEWER: YEAH PICK UP THERE THAT THERE WAS A LITTLE GIRL ACROSS THE—

Evers: OK, all right. There was a little white girl across the street from where my aunt lived and at that time, as I said, we had moved with, with my aunt, we played together. We snuck off and played together because we knew that we weren't supposed to simply because of the difference of the color of our skin. That went on for a year or two and it became very evident that her parents had talked to her and told her by no means should she ever play with me again because I was, as she said to me, the little girl said to me, I can't play with you anymore

because you're a nigger. That led to other words and a physical fight between the two of us, and that certainly said to me, even then, that there was a major difference between us, black and white, and that even though we had been friends, we lived across the street from each other, at a certain point in your life, that kind of relationship cannot exist in a segregated society.

INTERVIEWER: GOOD. VERY GOOD. OK, LET'S CUT, OK?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WHERE, WHERE WE AT?

[cut]

00:10:32:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 363]

INTERVIEWER: I'D LIKE TO GET YOUR—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

INTERVIEWER: —I'D LIKE TO GET YOU TO DESCRIBE THIS MAN MEDGAR THAT YOU MEET IN COLLEGE AND DESCRIBE HIM IN THE SENSE OF WHAT ARE THE THINGS THAT YOU SAW OF HIM IN THE BEGINNING THAT BEGAN TO GIVE YOU AN, AN IDEA OF WHAT HE MIGHT BE, THAT WHAT HE WAS, WHAT HE MIGHT BE ABOUT.

Evers: I met Medgar on my first day, first hour of being on the campus of Alcorn in, in college Lorman, Mississippi. I was certainly the lowly little freshman and I found out later that he was a junior and one of the football stars. And, at that particular time, the football team was there practicing and after they finished their practice, they came up on campus to overlook the new crop of young women that, that had come in. And he came over to me and said, get off of that post, you might get electrocuted. And I thought to myself, huh, he has a lot of nerve. He has a lot of nerve. He had a lot of class. He had a lot of dignity, even then. He stood tall, he had—he looked clean even though he had on his football togs, there was something different about him that stood out. I can recall looking at him as he walked away and thinking to myself, hmm, and realizing that my aunt and grandmother had told me, don't get involved with any veterans, dear. And I found out that he was a veteran and that just seemed to have cinched it. I asked around campus about him, over that first month mainly because we saw each other every day. I was a music student and the music hall—practice hall—was very close to the dormitory, and in the line where he would walk by to go to football practice. And I asked people about him and they said, oh yes, Medgar, he's OK. He's a rabble-rouser. And I was very curious.

INTERVIEWER: GOT TO CUT YOU. I'M SORRY.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

[cut]

00:12:44:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: OK I'D LIKE YOU TO PICK IT UP WITH YOU WERE DESCRIBING QUALITIES ABOUT HIM, HE'S A RABBLE-ROUSER. HE WAS A CERTAIN TYPE OF PERSON. YOU'RE CHANGING FOCUS—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: COME ON, GIVE ME A SECOND. OK, GO.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Evers: I asked people on the campus about Medgar who was he, what was he, and they said, oh, he's a rabble-rouser. I said, what is, what is a rabble-rouser? Well, you know, he's always talking about registering and voting. He's always talking about, you know, our rights and our responsibilities. We don't have time for that, you know, he never attends any of the fraternity activities and what-not. But I found out that Medgar was voted one of the most popular men on campus. That he was the junior president of, of his class. That he was the editor of the newspaper and also editor of the annual student album. So with those qualities, I said, he has to be a leader. I basically was looking for someone like that anyway. I wanted somebody who was strong. I wanted someone who knew who he was and someone who was responsible. Medgar and I would talk occasionally then we started dating and, I think, I was a pretty good listener and he was a good talker. He would tell me what he wanted. He let me know in no uncertain terms, that he was going to have four children. He let me know in no uncertain terms, that I was going to be his wife, for a seventeen-year-old, it kind of threw you off guard that someone would come to you and say that almost on your second date, second or third date. So I made a determination that he was a man who knew what he wanted, who was outspoken, and indeed, was a leader. But he also talked about his experiences in the Army and coming home, coming back to America and finding that he was still called boy. Finding that he still could not get a decent job or could not go to any college or university that he wanted to, that he couldn't register and vote, that people in his hometown of Decatur, and other parts of Mississippi, and his mother, were being treated without, without any respect at all. Being called by their first names, that we couldn't shop where we wanted to, that we couldn't try on clothes. The light came on in my heart and in my mind because Medgar represented to me many things at that particular time, but one of the things that he represented was a type of savior for me with all of the anger and the frustrations that I had had myself growing up in that segregated society, and not knowing anyone who talked about them and who talked about doing something about them. So it was a, a mixture of, of being a father, later my husband, of being a dear friend, of being a teacher, there were so many roles.

But I saw in him a strength that was very unusual at that particular time with other people simply because everybody else seemed to be having fun. And the—even the teachers were a little in awe of Medgar because not only did he say to the students, but to the faculty as well, we've got to do something about this.

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S FINE. CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YOU NEED TO—

[cut]

00:16:45:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARK.

BAGWELL: AND I'D LIKE YOU TO TELL ME WHAT YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THE DEATH OF TILL AND INCLUDING IN THAT WHETHER YOU WERE FRIGHTENED BY IT AND, AND WHAT YOUR FEELINGS WERE IN TERMS OF IT BEING IN MISSISSIPPI AND ALL THOSE KINDS OF THINGS.

Evers: The Emmett Till case was one that rocked, I think, everyone in Mississippi. It certainly shook us to the realization that age had nothing to do with young victims of, of segregation and, and, and racism. Medgar was the field secretary for the NAACP and had been working there in the state. He and Amzie Moore and some others always made investigations in, in, in the, in the Delta.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'RE IN TROUBLE.

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

[cut]

00:17:45:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKING.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S PICK THE EMMETT TILL STORY BACK UP.

Evers: The Emmett Till story, case—

INTERVIEWER: START OVER AGAIN.

Evers: The Emmett Till case was one that shook the foundations of Mississippi both black and white, because of one, with the white community because of the fact that it had become nationally publicized. With us as blacks, because it said, even a child was not safe from racism and, and bigotry and death. Medgar was the field secretary for the NAACP and he and others who worked with him had the responsibility of going into these areas wherever there might have been problems and investigating these cases. I can recall so well that Medgar cried when he found that this had happened to Emmett Till. Cried out of the frustration and the anger and of wanting to physically strike out and hurt. I myself, felt anger, frustration, almost a hopelessness, at that time, that things were going to continue to happen. But it also said something else to me too, that Medgar's life was in danger twenty-four hours a day, because at that particular time, he was the only person who was in the forefront of investigations, of getting the word of these autocracies out to, to the public. I bled for Emmett Till's mother. I know when she came to Mississippi and appeared at the mass meetings, how everyone just poured out their hearts to her, went into their pockets when people had only two or three pennies, and gave that. Some way to say that, we bleed for you, we hurt for you, we are so sorry what happened to Emmett. And that this is just one thing that will be a frame of reference for us to move on to do more things, positively, to eliminate this from happening ever again. It was a sad and, and, and terrible time, and perhaps it's too bad to have to say that sometimes it takes those kinds of things to happen, to help a people become stronger and to eliminate the fear that they have to speak out and do something that will eliminate murders such as Emmett Till's. And that was kind of the, the, the feeling that went through the black community in, in the entire state at that particular time.

INTERVIEWER: OK LET'S, LET'S CUT FOR A SECOND.

[cut]

00:20:42:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 364]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKING.

INTERVIEWER: —GET WITNESSES OUT OF THE STATE. I'M, I'M CORRECT RIGHT?

Evers: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: AND IN TRY—AND EVEN FINDING THEM AND I'D JUST LIKE TO GET A LITTLE BIT OF WHAT MEDGAR WAS INVOLVED IN.

Evers: OK, hold, hold on, before, before—

INTERVIEW: OH CUT.

[cut]

00:20:59:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKING.

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO I WANT YOU TO TALK ABOUT YOUR, YOUR, YOUR HUSBAND'S ROLE, THE ROLE HE PLAYED IN THE TRIAL OF EMMETT TILL IN HELPING TO GET THE WITNESSES TOGETHER.

Evers: Medgar played a very important role, I feel, in the Emmett Till case. As field secretary for the NAACP, a part of his responsibility was to investigate murders. He and Amzie Moore and a few others, dressed as sharecroppers, would change cars to trucks and what-not, go on the plantations ask people—go into the communities and ask people information about the murderers or the accused murderers, of what had happened, of certainly making contact with the local officials and getting the press out. And it was a very dangerous job at that particular time. Medgar was also responsible not only for finding witnesses but helping to get them out of town, and I remember one very distinct case where he used a casket, and put a person in a casket and, and in conjunction with a mortuary, and got the person out of town, out of town, out of the state, across the border, to Tennessee, and then north.

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET'S CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

[cut]

00:22:19:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 364]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK, SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARKING

INTERVIEWER: OK, TALK TO ME ABOUT THAT TIME THE NAACP, NAACP IS JUST GETTING STARTED AND THE RESPONSE BY, NOT JUST BY THE WHITE COMMUNITY, BUT THE BLACK COMMUNITY.

Evers: During 1953-54, when the NAACP in Mississippi was coming into its own and did come into its own with its first field secretary, which was Medgar, it was met, the NAACP organization was met with—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AN AIRPLANE.

INTERVIEWER: LET'S CUT.

[cut]

00:22:57:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARKING.

INTERVIEWER: OK LET'S TALK ABOUT—

Evers: 1953-1954 was really the beginning of a real presence of the NAACP in the state of Mississippi. That was mainly due to the fact that the NAACP had its first field secretary, who was Medgar, to try to bring together those people who had memberships and who really wanted to be organized in some way. Of course, the organization of the first field secretary and state office, was met with different reactions from both blacks and whites in, in the state. With the whites through telephone calls and threats as well as editorials in the newspapers they were saying that this was simply not a time for this kind of organization. That it was going to do more harm to blacks than good. Blacks, on the other hand, were afraid for the most part. Afraid of losing jobs, afraid of being hurt, afraid of being killed. So for anyone, one person or more who were trying to organize, it was a very difficult task because you were dealing with almost insurmountable odds there, of eliminating the fear from black peoples' hearts and getting them to become actively involved. I, I think of how some of even our classmates, college classmates, would see Medgar coming and cross the street, and not want to talk to him, not want to be seen with him, out of fear. I can recall how we would go door to door to some of the teachers' homes and talk to them about joining the NAACP and they said, no way, I'll lose my job. The newspapers, including the only black newspaper there, was very, very negative about Medgar. He was called, a young upstart, wet behind the ears, someone who would never be able to pull together black people because they had better sense than being involved with an organization like the NAACP.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: GOOD.

INTERVIEWER: PLANES COMING—

[cut]

00:25:12:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKING.

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO TELL ME '54 HAPPENS, WHAT DOES THAT MEAN TO—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: HOLD ON A SECOND. LET ME GET THIS—OK.

INTERVIEWER: ALL RIGHT.

Evers: The 1954 school desegregation decision had a profound impact upon everyone certainly in Mississippi. It was met with a great deal of hope—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH CUT.

[cut]

00:25:44:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OH, WAIT ONE MINUTE. MARK PLEASE.

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO WE'RE GETTING THE '54 DECISION.

Evers: Yes, the Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools in 1954 had a profound impact upon both blacks and whites in the state of Mississippi. And, of course, that decision was met with different feelings. The whites in Mississippi saw it as an assault upon them, their way of life. There were threats, both in press, calls that were, were made back and forth.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, WE'RE—FORGET THE DOGS.

[cut]

00:26:29:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FIFTEEN.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ONE SECOND. OKIDOKÉ.

Evers: The 1954 school desegregation act had profound impact upon everyone in Mississippi. And, of course, there were two reactions to it. The blacks felt very positive. It, it gave a degree of hope. It was a signal to start moving in a direction. It was, it was a focus. Of course, there was a tremendous amount of fear as well that went along with what we would have to do to implement the school desegregation act. In the white community it was quite different as one would expect. There were flaming editorials about blood flowing in the street, about what would happen to the dear little white children if ever blacks and whites went to school together. There were certainly calls to eliminate all black leadership and, at that time, there were one or two that were actually, actually visible. But as a result of that decision, as a result of the growing organization of the NAACP, regardless of how difficult it was to get people to overcome their fears we began to press on that. As people began to sign petitions, I recall what a difficult time Medgar had trying to persuade people to sign the petitions to desegregate the schools, people found that their lives were threatened, that their jobs were lost, that their names were printed in, in newspapers throughout their communities and were—the ads actually said, these are the people who have signed, you know what to do to get back at them. I can recall a couple of people being pulled by rope behind cars all of those kinds of things took place and, on one hand, it helped to strengthen the determination of people to join the NAACP because that was the only organization that was doing anything that was visible there. And it also said to the whites that we have to organize better. They formed the White Citizens Councils and other groups, and that was the beginning, really, of a major clash that, that went throughout the '60s.

INTERVIEWER: VERY GOOD. VERY GOOD.

[cut]

00:28:58:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO TALK TO ME ABOUT DESEGREGATION AND WHAT IT MEANT IN TERMS OF QUALITY EDUCATION AND IN TERMS OF YOUNG PEOPLE OVER THERE.

Evers: Medgar saw the desegregation of the schools in Mississippi as a very, very important thing to the growth and advancement of black people as well as the state. He was committed to that. He saw it in the sense that education was one of the tools that blacks had to increase their standard of living and to take their rightful places in, in society, and to be able to compete. He felt, as the rest of us did, that there would be no separate but equal schools, that the system would not allow equality as such. Therefore, it was necessary to go through the courts to break that ruling down and to see that we could go to all of the schools where we could have the best education possible that the state presented for its, for its people. On the

other hand, there was another aspect of Medgar's feeling about the need for desegregated schools. Beyond the study, the theory there was the human element. That it would provide young people a chance to work together and not only to learn about subject matter and what-not, but to be able to learn about each other. Therefore understanding each other, and hopefully, over generations, be able to work together as human beings and not see black or white. He was committed to that to the point where he was the first person, I should say we were, to file to de—to desegregate the schools in, in Jackson, Mississippi. That suit was known as Darrell Evers Versus the State of Mississippi.

INTERVIEWER: OK. GOOD.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: GOOD.

Evers: Did it—

[cut]

00:31:00:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 365]

Evers: —and the fuzziness over areas makes me realize, my God, yeah. But, but I'm, I'm staying up with what's now and, and I can't forget, but it gets—

INTERVIEWER: IT GETS FUZZY.

Evers: Fuzzy.

INTERVIEWER: YEAH.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLLING.

INTERVIEWER: OK, JUMPING AHEAD NOW TO DESEGREGATE. TALK TO ME ABOUT WHY MEDGAR APPLIED TO OLE MISS AND THEN WHEN HE WAS REJECTED WHY DIDN'T HE FIGHT ANY FURTHER, AT THAT TIME?

Evers: Medgar was the first known black to apply to enter Ole Miss in Oxford, Mississippi. It was something that he wanted to do because he wanted to study law. The only place where he could study law in Mississippi was at Ole Miss. He applied at that time he asked for support from the NAACP of which they filed a case for him. Now the papers were filed with the administration and the Governor even got into the act, and decided to ask Medgar for an interview or, or to meet with him.

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

Evers: OK, I—

[cut]

00:32:13:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARKING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: TAKE EIGHTEEN.

INTERVIEWER: OK, PICK UP THAT MEDGAR WAS THE FIRST TO APPLY—

Evers: Medgar was the first known black to apply for admission to the University of Mississippi. He filled out all applications. He was called for an interview particularly with the Governor. And in the interview they wanted to know why he wanted to go to Ole Miss. He did reply that he wanted to study law and he felt that it was, it was his right to be able to, to do that. And with some of the other questions that were asked, I recall Medgar saying, yes, and I told them too, that I bathed every day, and that this black didn't come off, they would have nothing to fear with that. But he felt very strongly about education, and the power that it would give blacks to move ahead in, into society.

00:33:05:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. HE WAS REJECTED.

Evers: He was rejected at Ole Miss and that came as no surprise to any of us. There was a great deal of press about his application. A number of threats that came to us, but also the NAACP became quite interested in him because they were going to handle the case against Ole Miss. They, meaning the NAACP, issued an invitation to Medgar to start the first NAACP state office and he accepted, and that's how he made the transition from really a trouble maker trying to get into Ole Miss to being the first field secretary of the NAACP.

INTERVIEWER: OK, OLE MISS WAS SO LATE IN THE DESEGREGATION BATTLE, IT HAPPENED IN '62, MANY OTHER COLLEGES HAD ALREADY BEEN DESEGREGATED. WHY—WHAT ABOUT—WHY WAS IT SO, THE LAST COLLEGE? IS IT SOMETHING TO DO WITH MISSISSIPPI ITSELF? [pause] CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

[cut]

00:34:16:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARKING. ONE SECOND.

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

[cut]

00:34:26:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKING.

Evers: Ole Miss was very difficult and, and perhaps one of the, the last colleges to, to desegregate as such. But it did not happen easily. There was massive resistance as—I think most of the population expected that from Mississippi anyway. Why did they expect it? Because Mississippi had always taken a leadership position, if you will, in the sense of defying the federal government, of seeing the federal government and all of its laws as imposing upon states' rights, their rights—that they were not going to be told what to do and that indeed that their population, particularly their black population, would stay in its place, and they—that they were not going to get the kind of education that whites were going to get.

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

Evers: Yeah. I, I, I lost my train.

[cut]

00:35:35:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKING. JUST A SECOND HERE. ONE SECOND PLEASE. OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Evers: One of the reasons that Ole Miss was such a difficult university to, to desegregate was due to the fact of the publicity the emphasis that the Mississippi press gave to, to the desegregation of Mississippi. I can recall one of the newspapers having a front page editorial with a broad black band around it that called for blood to flow in the streets if, if the school was desegregated. Of course, *the Governor took a very active role in talking about the threats that the state would make on its blacks who would try to enter the school. It was an effort to instill fear in the hearts of blacks. And it was also an effort – and a very successful one – to arouse fear and a kind of frenzy in the white community to fight back*

against the change within their system. And we were hitting them at the very heart of it in, in the educational system. The press played up all of the negatives that could possibly happen. The press through—the media, I should say, the radio stations continually played the rebel songs, you had the rebel calls, you had almost every five minutes, a message from the Governor that talked about blood flowing in the streets, we must resist, that the federal government is an enemy of ours, that we are, if you will, kind of an island unto ourselves. And it really took one back into the days of the Civil War from what you could read and, and ascertain that happened from that. It was a maddening time. But it was also a time that gave us, as a people, more of a determination to follow through.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

[cut]

00:38:06:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARKING.

INTERVIEWER: OK. DESCRIBE FOR ME JAMES MEREDITH AND TELL ME WHAT MADE HIM TICK? WHAT KEPT HIM GOING THROUGH THIS AT THAT TIME?

Evers: James Meredith, I found, was a complicated person. He was not a person where you could get to know the inner depths of him right away. He and Medgar were friends and they had to be friends and, and have a close working relationship in his efforts, in Mer—Meredith's efforts, to try to get into Ole Miss. I would say that James had a kind of self-assuredness, a mission, a sense of mission and responsibility and duty, and he carried it off in what some of us thought as a kind of cocky manner. And, I think, more than anything that was a kind of facade to steel himself against all of the abuse, physically possibly, as well as verbal and mental that he would go through once on campus and everything that he was trying to go—that he was going through to try to get to Ole Miss.

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH. WE'RE IN TROUBLE HERE.

[cut]

00:39:35:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK IT.

INTERVIEWER: I WANT TO TRY AND GET THROUGH THIS OLE MISS STUFF, AIM FIRST—OK, SO TALK TO ME A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT JAMES MEREDITH AND THE PRESSURE.

Evers: James Meredith was under a tremendous amount of pressure as he tried to enter Ole Miss. Pressure from, I think, his friends and family because we were concerned about his health and his well being. That was certainly discussed when we, when we met and broke bread together. But the press itself, the media, pursued him endlessly, perhaps more once he entered Ole Miss, but even before that time. He was a kind of celebrity that, that did not necessarily have the, the glamour behind it. People wanted to know who he was, what he was doing, where he came from, his background. And I always felt that James was a very private person. He was not one to talk or brag about himself that much. And he didn't share that much of himself. It was difficult to kind of cut through. I can recall being surprised just seeing him smile and laugh at times, when we were gathered together, you know, on a very informal basis. The pressures were tremendous but *I think that the façade that he would present to the public was one that was somewhat cold, somewhat cocky. But it was necessary to do that in order to protect himself, 'cause, after all, he was a human being with feelings, with fear.* So—and he had a commitment and a job to do and that was his best way to do it.

INTERVIEWER: GOOD. THANK YOU. RIGHT ON TIME.

[cut]

00:41:34:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 366]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

Evers: I saw James Meredith as a man with a mission. One who felt that his pursuit of breaking down the racial barriers at Ole Miss would do two things, one, that it would help open the door for others to follow him, but equally important, that he would be elevated, if you will, into the pages of, of history. It was two-pronged. The good for himself and, I mean the good for others, but also, a kind of, almost self-serving thing to assure him a place in history. And I don't think there's anything wrong with that but James sometimes could carry himself in a way where he floated a few feet above the common man. And perhaps one has to have that kind of personality to be able to, to survive what, what he did.

INTERVIEWER: OK. CUT. QUICK CHANGE.

[cut]

00:42:54:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKING.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WHAT DID YOU THINK ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT DURING THIS TIME?

Evers: Oh, I feel that the role of the federal government during this time was one of certainly playing politics. I personally don't feel that the federal government stepped in as soon as they should have. Perhaps it was a thing of allowing the state of Mississippi to go about things in its own time and to see how far the state would go. But I rather believe that there was a great deal of reluctance because of simply politics being played. Certainly, the Governor of the state of Mississippi said to the federal government, you know, don't bother to come here. The threats were made that there would be no support, that Mississippi as such would secede from, from, from the rest of the country. But the important thing is that the federal government did step in, what I consider at the last minute, and perhaps prevented a great deal of blood from being shed that would have had they not. People in Mississippi, I think, particularly blacks, looked to the federal government as a kind of protector and became a little disenchanted in, in, in all of it during this period of time, with the haste in which the federal government acted and, by that I mean that they did not act in haste, and perhaps were not strong enough at the time, in showing that they were behind what was constitutionally, constitutionally right.

INTERVIEWER: OK, GOOD.

[cut]

00:44:55:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: TWENTY-SIX, RIGHT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: YEAH.

INTERVIEWER: WHEN MEREDITH WAS ENROLLED AT THE UNIVERSITY HOW DID YOU FEEL? WAS IT A TRIUMPH, VICTORY? WHAT WAS YOUR FEELING AT THAT POINT?

Evers: When Meredith enrolled in Ole Miss it was a triumph. It was something that many people had worked for. It validated the legal system, it validated the NAACP's approach to this issue. It validated Medgar's involvement and the sacrifices, the hard work that he had put

forth to try to help Meredith get in, and I think it validated Meredith in his ability to stick to it and see it through. And knowing full well that once he enrolled for the most part, he was going to be on his own, and he would have to survive by his strengths and, and, and his wit. We did what you would call almost dance in the street, as a result of it, because it was a major breakthrough. It said indeed that there is hope and that we are moving forward and that perhaps the sacrifices that had been made had been worth it because we are talking about not just one man's education, but what will happen for the rest of other generations yet to come. And we celebrated.

INTERVIEWER: GOOD. OK.

[cut]

00:46:28:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

BAGWELL: —I'D LIKE TO GET INTO IT BY GIVING US A SENSE OF REFERENCE THAT FREEDOM RIDES HAD GOTTEN INTO JACKSON. THESE KINDS OF THINGS WERE THINGS THAT MADE HIM KIND OF DEAL WITH IT, YOU KNOW, SO THAT IT WORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE STORY.

Evers: [pause] How can I describe Medgar in terms of being violent or nonviolent? Medgar worked for the NAACP and certainly went along with the NAACP in their support in terms of legal redress, however, I have to say that he was not totally a nonviolent man. He believed in doing things in a nonviolent way if they could be accomplished in that manner. In Medgar's very early years of, of activity when we lived in Mound Bayou, Mississippi—he started there, the formation of a Mau Mau group based on the other Mau Maus that we know so well, Jomo Kenyatta and others. And he felt at that time that it—the only way we could gain our rights would be through violent action. He changed his mind, of course, but as he grew in his job in the NAACP, he found it necessary to have both sides. I recall an incident when he rode on a bus from Meridian to Jackson, Mississippi and at that time he was possibly the only black, maybe one other on the bus, and was hit al—almost drug off of the bus. Medgar's inclination was to fight back but his common sense ruled and he realized that he would have been murdered right there on the spot. But he took that anger and that frustration to fuel himself for nonviolence in his activities. But when the students came along with their spontaneity, with their willingness to be hurt and to strike back if necessary, I think, it was kind of a turning point for him. And he began to question the legal method and thought perhaps what we had to do was to perhaps arm ourselves. And that had not quite gelled in his mind as to exactly what he was going to do and that happened just before his death. Now, we had guns in our house in every room. I slept with a small revolver next to me on the nightstand. He, he slept with a rifle next to him. We had one in the hall, we had one in the front room. He had one with him the night that he was killed. And we often talked about that and he said, yes I will use it if it's necessary to protect myself, to protect my family, to

protect my friends. However, Myrlie, one may never know if one will be able to get to the gun in time. And the night that he was killed, it was right there next to him, and he didn't have a chance to use it. And, and there was this, this switch and this change because he felt that perhaps we weren't moving fast enough, that the legal way was just a little bit too slow. I think Medgar was at a point in time where he was really questioning where he stood in the whole nonviolent movement.

INTERVIEWER: OK. NOW WITH THAT IN MIND—

[cut]

00:50:23:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

INTERVIEWER: OK, NOW TALK TO ME ABOUT MEDGAR'S, WITH THAT IDEA OF HIS CHANGING AT THAT TIME, AND YOU—HE'S UNCERTAIN ABOUT WHAT HE BELIVES IN RIGHT NOW IN TERMS OF DIRECT ACTION, VIOLENCE, NONVIOLENCE, AND TALK TO ME ABOUT HIS DIFFICULTY WITH THE NATIONAL OFFICE, NAACP, THE NATIONAL, NATIONAL OFFICE AND THEY REALLY NOT BEING THERE WHEN HE NEEDED THEM.

Evers: Well, those were very difficult times those times—

INTERVIEWER: WHEN YOU SAY THOSE TIMES—

Evers: Those times—'60s.

INTERVIEWER: START AGAIN.

Evers: Those were very difficult times in the '60s for Medgar in terms of his sense of direction. There had been a number of things that he had wanted to do such as work with Dr. King along with the NAACP or the NAACP working with SCLC. The national office had indicated that the two organizations needed to stay separate. Medgar, on one hand, certainly admired Dr. King and the nonviolent methods that he had. But he had also seen so much happen to, to black people, the killings, the lynchings, the burnings, the deaths, the slow pace, and really being encouraged by the young people to be more forceful and, I think, it was that group of college students that helped to light the fire or to make it burn more in him to do something that would make things work a little faster. He had had a taste of success with the boycotts of the stores there and we found that the only way we could get almost an hundred percent support of the black—

00:52:24:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Evers: —community, was not necessarily to talk to them. That was an important part too, but if anyone dared go in one of those stores, that it was very necessary to take them in the back alley and take their clothes and purchases and things away from them.

INTERVIEWER: CUT PLEASE. DID WE RUN OUT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH, WE RAN OUT.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Evers: Oh. Taking too—

00:52:46:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 367]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S PICK IT UP WITH THE CHILDREN AND WHAT THEY REPRESENTED IN TERMS OF MEDGAR HAVING TO DEAL WITH CHANGING HIS OWN IDEAS ABOUT WHAT DO AND WHERE TO GO WITH THE MOVEMENT.

Evers: In the '60s, Medgar was going through a little bit of soul searching in terms of whether the legal method was the, the quickest way and the best way to, to move us forward. Certainly, the young people who had been involved and who really were taking the leadership in, in the activism helped to make him focus more on whether they—whether we should be pursuing things in a legal manner or whether we should be pursuing them more or less in the streets. Medgar was very moved by, by the young people that volunteered to sit in the restaurants, who were beaten, who were spat upon, and who were thrown in a kind of concentration camp in the fair grounds of Jackson, Mississippi. He was also moved by the freedom riders, what was happening to him. He saw that this country, as a whole, and particularly the South was becoming more violent and questioned whether that violence should not be met with violence of some sort, yet the other part of him realized that nothing could be solved by violence but more violence. He wanted to change some of the strategies and, and techniques that we were using in Mississippi and, of course, being an organization man, being, the field secretary for the NAACP, he had to get approval from the national office. When he approached the management there with some suggestions for, for change that perhaps would lead to a degree of violence or at least that were not as slow as the legal

method had been, he found himself up against a stone wall.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WERE SOME OF THOSE THINGS?

Evers: [pause] Cut.

INTERVIEWER: CUT, I'M SORRY.

[cut]

00:55:09:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

INTERVIEWER: TALK TO ME ABOUT IT.

Evers: During mid 1962-1963, Medgar was going through a real assessment of the direction in which he was headed as the leader of the NAACP in the state of Mississippi. There was a decision that he had to make in terms of whether the NAACP should follow the legal very slow process of change; of whether he should move into a more activist role and when I say move into a more activist role, he and his followers. The young people who had sat in at the restaurants and the library and, and, and many of the other establishments, had encouraged Medgar as well as others, other blacks, to join them and not be afraid.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

INTERVIEWER: FINISH THAT—SORRY.

[cut]

00:56:16:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

Evers: Medgar did make a—m—did—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: HOLD ON ONE SECOND.

Evers: [laughs] Oh, OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Evers: Medgar did make a conscious decision to move the Mississippi movement ahead. He had—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'RE IN TROUBLE.

[cut]

00:56:40:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK. OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Evers: Medgar did make a decision that the legal procedures that the NAACP had been following in the state of Mississippi were beginning to be somewhat outdated and that the movement had to accelerate its efforts. Certainly, the students had helped to lead the way and as Medgar tried to get the support from the national office to endorse the sit-ins and other kinds of activities, he found that he had come up against a road block. The national office did not feel that those strategies and techniques were the ones that the organization should be pursuing. As a result of that Medgar had some very difficult days trying to decide whether he should actually remain with the NAACP or not. The NAACP was more than an organization, it was a family. People who worked very closely together and loved each other, but he also realized that the state of Mississippi and the young people who were involved and the people, as a whole, were not going to remain the same, that things were changing, and the organization had to move along with it. He, being the key spokesman, really the only person with his neck stuck out there, realized that he had to make a decision to move the efforts along and he was prepared to do that even if it meant, as he told me, leaving the NAACP and starting his own movement.

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

[cut]

00:58:25:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKING.

INTERVIEWER: OK, NOW LET'S TALK ABOUT BEING OUT THERE IN THE

FRONT, BEING ON THE FRONT LIKE THAT, THE VULNERABILITY AND, WITH THIS CONFLICT, WHAT THAT, WHAT THAT REALLY MEANT.

Evers: Of course, Medgar realized that his decision to move the movement forward with more speed certainly put him in the limelight more and that his life was constantly threatened. We realized that, as it had been over the years, but became even more so as the economic boycotts worked very successfully. We had constant phone threats there were—there was a fire bomb thrown at our home. Medgar received threats at the office—[pause] maybe we can pick up from there?

[cut]

00:59:19:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK. ONE SECOND. AND HERE.

Evers: Because of the success of the economic boycotts, because of the media attention that was given to our efforts, and specifically to Medgar as a leader of this movement, he became much more vulnerable in terms of his safety and his life. Our home was fire bombed. We received threats on almost an hourly basis at home. He received threats through the mail it was a life of never knowing when that bullet was going to hit. It was something that he knew, but as he said to me and as he said to his followers in, in the mass meetings: we can't let that stop us. I have to go forward, there's a job to be done.

01:00:13:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, TALK ABOUT HOW CONSUMING THAT IS IN, IN TERMS OF YOUR WHOLE LIFE. YOUR LIFE TOGETHER. YOUR CHILDREN. THE WHOLE THING.

Evers: [pause] It—survival?

INTERVIEWER: NO, JUST LIVING WITH THAT THREAT AND THAT WHOLE—WHAT IT MEANS IN TERMS OF YOUR LIVES.

Evers: I can't say that Medgar our children or myself had what one would call a normal life. We lived under the constant threat of danger to us. Medgar was an absolute, marvelous father. He could talk to the children and tell them what was happening, explain to them, and he devised a game with them where they decided where was the safest place in the house to hide if something happened. The children made a decision with their father that the bathtub was. They could not understand everything that was happening. They were well aware that their father's life was in danger, and at their young ages 3, 8 and 9, they worried constantly about that. They also realized that our lives were in danger as well. We were followed—

INTERVIEWER: LET'S CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

[cut]

01:02:30:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK. MARK TWO-NINE-THREE.

Evers: To be born black and to live in Mississippi was to say that your life wasn't worth much in that particular point in time. Medgar knew full well when he assumed the position of field director for the NAACP that there were going to be threats and that his life would possibly be taken from him. But certainly during the point of time when the economic boycotts were so successful and we were having rallies every day and every night it became very evident that Medgar was a target because he was the leader. The whole mood there of white Mississippians was to eliminate Medgar Evers and the problem would have been solved there—there would be no more uprisings and, and from the blacks in, in, in that community. How wrong they were. But of course, it affected Medgar's and my life, and our children's lives, profoundly. I must say that as any couple would argue, we had our arguments, but we also knew that whenever he left that house that we may never see each other again, that it was necessary for us to touch base any number of times by phone with each other, if no more than to reassure each other that the other was all right. We made a pact. Medgar and I said we would never part angry and, as a result of that, we decided that regardless of how angry we were, we would always kit-kiss each other before parting. And we did that, even at times when I think we perhaps would like to have walked away from each other in anger—

01:03:27:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Evers: —our children did not have—

INTERVIEWER: LET'S CUT. I'M SORRY WE JUST RAN OUT OF FILM.

01:03:31:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 368]

INTERVIEWER: THIS IS YOUR HUSBAND—THIS IS YOUR, YOUR CHILDREN’S—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

INTERVIEWER: —FATHER. IT’S THE MAN YOU LOVE AND HOW IN THE BEGINNING YOU, YOU WERE NOT WILLING TO, TO, TO LOSE HIM OR TO SACRIFICE THAT. AND THEN HOW THAT BECAME RECOGNITION THAT—AND HOPING THAT IT WOULD NOT HAPPEN.

Evers: [coughs]

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Evers: Medgar was my husband, my love, the father of my children, he was my life. And in the very beginning of his involvement with the NAACP and the civil rights movement, I really fought having him—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: TROUBLE.

INTERVIEW: SORRY.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OH GOD.

[cut]

01:04:14:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

Evers: Medgar was my husband, my friend, the father of my children, my love, and we both knew that his involvement, his job with the NAACP would possibly cost him his life. And in the earlier years, it was something that I really fought. I, I could not give full support because I wanted him for us. I wanted our lives to go on for a long period of time. But I realized his total commitment to the cause. I realized that he would not be happy unless he were giving his all, unless he were moving leading this movement. And we came to realize, in those last few days, last few months, that our time was short, *it was simply in the air. You, you, you knew that something was going to happen, and the logical person for it to happen to was Medgar. It certainly brought us closer during that time. As a matter of fact, we didn't talk. We didn't have to. We communicated without words. It was a touch; it was a look; it was holding each other; it was music playing. And I used to try to reassure him and tell him, nothing's going to happen to you, the FBI is here – laugh – everybody knows you, you are in the press. They wouldn't dare do anything to you.* Medgar's approach was a much more

realistic one, and he would say, honey, you've got to be strong, I want you to take care of my children, it probably won't be too long. And I said, of course not, you know, that's not the way it's going to be. I have to recall here, perhaps, that last day that we had together. When he left that morning and went out of the door, told the children how much he loved them, turned to me and said, I'm so tired. I don't know if I can go on, but I have to. And I remember rushing to him and holding him and he kissed me and he said, I love you, I love you, and he walked out of the door. I told him how much I loved him too. He called three or four times during the day which was a little unusual with all of the activity that was going on at that time. He was very much in demand, from the students, people on the street, everybody. And he called to tell me how much he loved me again.

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

[cut]

01:07:18:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

Evers: —it was the last day that Medgar and I had together that I truly realized that that might be the last day and perhaps it was because of the way he, he reacted. He told me how tired he was, that he felt he couldn't go on—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: EXCUSE ME, I'M SORRY, I STARTED TOO TIGHT ON THAT.

Evers: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CAN YOU START—I'M SORRY. GO AHEAD. OK. GO AHEAD.

Evers: Wait, wait just a minute.

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

[cut]

01:07:56:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK. OK.

Evers: The last day that Medgar and I had together was one that we probably both realized

that something was going to happen either that day or very soon thereafter. I can recall the fatigue on his face and the way he looked at me and looked at the children and told us he loved us, it was something special about it. He said to me as he was about to walk out of the door, he said, Myrlie, I'm so tired, I don't know if I can keep going, but I can't stop.

INTERVIEWER: [pause] LET'S CUT.

[cut]

01:08:42:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKING. NOW.

Evers: Medgar and I both knew that the time that we would possibly have together was short. The last day that we did have was a very special day and I think both of us sensed, that what would happen to him, what we had feared for so long was right around the corner. He was very tired when he left home that morning and he told the children and myself how much he loved us, and he walked toward the door and he said, Myrlie, I'm so tired, I don't know if I can go on, but I can't stop. And I rushed toward him and I hugged him and told him, it's going to be all right, it's going to be all right. And we clung to each other, and he walked out of the door, and he came back in and said, I love you, I'll call you. Well, during that day, he called two or three times which was a little unusual with all of the activity that was going on. And each time he said, I love you I want you to know how much I love you. And I told him the same thing, and he said, I'll see you tonight. I said, fine. ***Late that night he came home. The children were still up. I was asleep across the bed. And we heard the motor of the car coming in and pulling into the driveway. We heard him get out of the car and the car door slam, and in that same instance, we heard the loud gun fire. The children fell to the floor, as he had taught them to do. I made a run for the front door, turned on the light, and there he was. The force of the bullet had pushed him forward, as I understand, and the strong man that he was, he had his keys in his hand and had pulled his body around the rest of the way to the door. There he lay. And I screamed, and people came out. Our next-door neighbor fired a gun, as he said, to try to frighten anyone away, and I knew then that that was it.*** That the man that I loved, had shared my life with, he had shared his life with me, where I had been a reluctant, in the beginning, supporter of his, and wanted him for myself and for my children, but understood that he said, I belong to my people and to my state and I want to help them and, in so doing, can help this country. I'm doing it for you, I'm doing it for the children, for other wives and other children. Realizing that, I realized that I had lost most of my life and that Mississippi, regardless of color, had lost one of their strongest and best leaders and this nation as a whole, as well as the NAACP, would not ever be able to replace a Medgar Evers.

INTERVIEWER: [pause] WHAT, WHAT, WHAT DID YOUR FEELING, WHAT WERE YOUR FEELINGS AT THAT TIME—I'M SORRY. LET'S CUT. I'M SORRY.

01:12:23:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: I WANT TO GET YOUR, YOUR, YOUR FEELINGS—

01:12:27:00

[cut]

[slate]

INTERVIEWER: —SPECIFICALLY TOWARDS WHITE PEOPLE AT THAT TIME.

Evers: At the time he was killed?

INTERVIEWER: MM-HMMM.

Evers: *When Medgar was felled by that shot and I rushed out and saw him lying there, and people from the neighborhood began to, to gather, there were also some whose color had, happened to been white. I don't think I have ever hated as much in my life as I did at that particular moment with anyone who had white skin. I screamed at the neighbors, and when the police finally got there, I told them that they had killed Medgar. And I can recall wanting so much to have a machine gun or something in my hands, and just stand there and mow them all down. I was just, I can't explain the depth of my hatred at that point.*

And it's interesting how Medgar's influence has, has directed me in terms of dealing with that hate, then, and over the years. He told me, as well as his children, that hate was not a healthy thing. That one could not function to one's—

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

[cut]

01:14:03:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 369]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

INTERVIEWER: SO WHAT DID, WHAT DID THE ACQUITAL OF YOUR MEDGAR'S ASSASSIN SAY TO YOU ABOUT, ASSASSIN SAY TO YOU ABOUT THIS COUNTRY AND JUSTICE?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CHIMING OUT. [sic] [pause] IT'S GOING AWAY. OK.

Evers: Two trials were held for the accused assassin of Medgar both ended in hung juries. And the whole case was very interesting insomuch as the way the accused killer was treated. He had a large cell that was open for him to come and go as he wanted to. He had television sets, he had typewriters. He had all, almost all of the comforts of home. This man was also accorded a major parade along the route of the highway on his way home. People had banners that were waved welcoming the hero home. The accused killer also made statement to the press that he was glad to have gotten rid of varmints. After the, oh, and I must say too, that the then Governor, Ross Barnett, actually made a visit to the accused during the trial, the first trial. And walked in the door when I was on the witness stand, stood, looked at me, turned and went over to the accused killer, sat down, shook his hand, said some remarks, and got up and went out. Also, the accused killer, after the second trial, ran for Lieutenant Governor of the state of Mississippi and he stated that he was doing this to show his appreciation to the people of Mississippi for what they had given, the support that they had given him while he was incarcerated. Interestingly enough, the man who ran for Governor was a prosecuting attorney. It says a couple of things to me and I had mixed emotions about it all. One was that this was the first time in the state of Mississippi that a white man had ever been brought to trial for the murder of a black, and—a black man. That was a step forward. A very small one, but a step forward. However, the fact that there were two trials, that this man was treated as a hero, and that everything was dropped, still said to me, at that time, and I'm not sure whether it isn't even at this day in time—that black is black. That perhaps the justice that is accorded other ethnic groups in the United States, and certainly in Mississippi, is still not accorded that of blacks. We're still fighting for first-class citizenship whether it be in life or whether it be in death.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT?

INTERVIEWER: CUT, YES.

[cut]

01:17:31:00

[slate]

INTERVIEWER: YOU SAID THAT—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED. MARK.

INTERVIEWER: —THE NEXT BULLET FROM THE ASSASSIN'S GUN AFTER THE, AFTER THE SEC—THE SECOND ACQUITTAL—I MEAN THE SECOND HUNG JURY YOU HAD SAID THAT THE NEXT BULLET FROM THE ASSASSIN'S GUN WILL BE

IN THE BACK OF A WHITE MAN. WHAT DID YOU MEAN WHEN YOU SAID THAT?

Evers: I said that the next bullet that would be fired could possibly be fired at the back of a white man. And basically by that I meant that anyone who stood for justice and equality, who stood up as a leader, who took a public stand, and pulled people around him to fight for those same things that his life or her life would be in danger as well. That the whole racism that was a cancer eating away at America could very easily move from black to white and, as I said those words, it was only a few months later that President Kennedy was assassinated.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK. LET'S CUT.

[cut]

01:18:52:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK. GET SECOND STICK. I MISSED THAT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SECOND MARKER.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: GO AHEAD.

INTERVIEWER: WHEN DID YOU FEEL LIKE IT WAS HAP—A MOVEMENT WAS HAPPENING?

Evers: I really cannot pinpoint a time as to when we felt that the movement had gelled and that it had become national. It was a gradual process. One of concentrating on where you were at that time, and also being aware that in Alabama, that in Georgia people were active and doing, that people were aware across the country, and were coming in to be a part of helping to, to eradicate racism in the South and hopefully through, throughout the rest of the country. And it was a gradual kind of thing, it was like a, a ground swell where you knew, and there was no time limit with it.

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

[cut]

[end of interview]

01:19:55:00

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