Interview with **Ivanhoe Donaldson**
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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 15]

[sound roll 19]

[hand slate]

INTERVIEWER 1: THIS IS—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: RIGHT, FIFTEEN?

INTERVIEWER 1: NOW THIS STILL FOUR—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: YOU GOT IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FIFTEEN, OK.

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN YOU TELL—YOU USED TO DRIVE FOOD AND CLOTHING BACK AND FORTH?

Donaldson: [laughs]

INTERVIEWER 1: FROM WHERE?

Donaldson: Well from all over the South, but, I mean, principally that started in 1962 when I brought food down from Michigan and Louisville from the state of Michigan and say

Louisville to Clarksville [sic], Mississippi.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT WAS GOING ON IN CLARKSVILLE [sic]?

Donaldson: Well, that was the dispersing point, was the, the—

INTERVIEWER 1: YOU BETTER START THAT AGAIN. DID YOU MISS THAT IN THE BEGINNING?

Donaldson: Oh. What happened?

INTERVIEWER 1: HE SLIPPED WITH THE MICROPHONE.

Donaldson: Oh.

INTERVIEWER 2: THEY'RE NOT GONNA HEAR HIS QUESTION.

INTERVIEWER 1: YES. IF—IT'S ABOUT GIVING ME A, A WHOLE STATEMENT.

Donaldson: OK. During the early '60s, particularly, the period of '60, '61, '62 I'm referring to the—there was a great deal of motion on the major cotton plantations to push people off which was their livelihood and their way of survival for both sharecroppers and some tenant farmers in the black community and the, the Delta area of Mississippi. And SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, put out a call for food to help subsidize peoples' needs as they were coming into Greenwood and Greenville and Jackson and Belzoni and various cities within the Delta of, of, of Mississippi. And one of the people they called was myself and we raised food in various communities that we knew a lot of people in. And so a guy by the name of Ben Taylor and myself collected food at East Lansing and at Ann Arbor and we brought it down to Louisville where we collected even larger truckloads and a bigger truck. And we took the food to Clarksville [sic] which is in Coahoma County where Doc Henry was; he was the head of Mississippi NAACP. And it was a major disbursing point in the Delta.

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INTERVIEWER 1: DID, DID YOU EVER HAVE ANY TROUBLE WITH THE LAW WHILE YOU WERE DOING THAT?

Donaldson: Oh, you're right. [laughs] Trouble with law was a way of life for an organizer in Mississippi, particularly, someone working with SNCC or CORE or the NAACP or COFO as was—which was the umbrella organization during that period of time and we had our share of—there was a—one night prior to Christmas I guess of '62. Ben and I were outside of Aaron—

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[cut]

[wild audio]

Donaldson: —Henry's drug store. We arrived about three a.m. in the morning. And the local sheriff came along; we were asleep in the truck—hello, world.

INTERVIEWER 1: HOLD ON A SEC.

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[cut]

[hand slate]

Donaldson: All over again?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SECOND STICK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SIXTEEN.

INTERVIEWER 1: YEAH. THAT WOULD ACTUALLY BE GOOD.

Donaldson: Well I—you would have to give me a lead.

INTERVIEWER 1: YES. YOU—WHAT WERE YOU DOING DURING 1962 DRIVING FOOD TO MISSISSIPPI? WHAT WAS THE SITUATION THERE?

Donaldson: Well, in the early '60s there was a, a lot of move by the—there was a major move by major plantation owners in the Delta area of the state to displace, to remove, to discourage activities by blacks who were trying to register to vote and one of the ways in which they created antagonisms or was to go to people's livelihoods: the sharecroppers and tenant farmers who worked in the cotton plantations in Mississippi. And so, they moved them off the plantation which took away their ability to survive and in the—in that process, SNCC put out a call to try and get people to raise food. And a guy named Ben Taylor and myself raised food in the Ann Arbor area of Michigan and East Lansing and we had a major project in Louisville, Kentucky, at the time, SNCC did and SCEF. And we went there and used it as a base and we got major truckloads of food and we drove it down to Clarks—Clarksville [sic], Mississippi in Coahoma County where Aaron Henry, who is the head of the NAACP in Mississippi, had his base in a drugstore. Everyone called him Doc Henry, but he was a pharmacist. And Doc was the statewide coordinator and Coahoma was a major disbursing point for food. Meet people's needs.

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INTERVIEWER 1: SO DID YOU—YOU HAVE ANY TROUBLE WITH THE LAW?

Donaldson: Well, you always have trouble with the law in Mississippi and especially people who work in direct action and voter registration or blacks who were struggling for any sense of justice and human rights. We had a few adventures. One of them as it—was prior to Christmas of '62 when Ben and I arrived in Clarksdale with a truckload of food in the wee hours of the morning around two, three a.m. in the morning we got there. And everyone had gone home and gone to bed. The store was locked. We didn't remember how to get to Doc's house so we simply parked the truck in front of the drugstore and cracked the windows and went to sleep. About two or three hours later around five a.m. the police woke us up. We were harassed and juggled around and thrown in jail. And were locked up there for about five days before anybody even knew that we were locked up and people knew we disappeared. We had sent a note—in the county jails in Mississippi they use prisoners to do local labor. And one of the jobs was collect money out of the parking meters. And I met this guy who was in a bunk beside me who was gonna collect money on Fourth Street where Doc's store is; I gave him a little note, saying, you know, Doc, I'm in jail, help, Ivanhoe. [laughs] And about three or four days later he was later to get a message back to us. It eventually became a fairly large case down there, but we were gotten out of jail by a writ of habeas corpus by the NAACP Inc. Fund which is filed in Federal Court. And we had a fifteen thousand dollar apiece bail bond and it was—we got beat up a couple of times while we were down there. The charges were, were based around the, the concept that we were taking narcotics across state lines, but what we had were aspirins and bandages as parts of first aid kits for people who might need, you know, some kind of medical help.

00:06:30:00

INTERVIEWER 1: OK.

Donaldson: The adventures of a SNCC field secretary. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICTS BETWEEN SAY THE NAA [sic] AND SNCC AND SCLC ON, ON THAT LEVEL? AND, AND HOW IT SEEMED TO WORK, HOW IT SEEMED TO WORK ON A STREET LEVEL, BUT NOT ON A, NOT ON AN OFFICIAL LEVEL.

Donaldson: Well it's my position that the organizational conflicts, when you say that term, people think of two people kind of at turk [sic] with each other in terms of fighting and squabbling. I don't think that existed. You know, there were differences between SNCC and SCLC, philosophically. There were differences between SNCC and SCLC and the NAACP and CORE about how you organize. SCLC was, principally, an organization built around the personality of Martin Luther King. It was an organization because it was a personality and its public presence tended to mobilize people. SNCC was an organization which was built around its units, its projects, its organizers. There were personalities in SNCC, but they weren't center to the existence of the organization. So there were normal tensions about how you go about doing something. Those tensions, I think, mounted into what the media and other people called conflicts; they were a different approach. SNCC believed in principally

organizing, creating institutional bases for people to manipulate for their own self interest while SCLC believed in dramatizing, mobilizing, and not, necessarily, as concerned about what you left afterwards. Both of them had a public role and both of them served a public purpose. There were natural rivalries, natural ego games. They all, however, blended into a complementary struggle of what became—what is or was then the civil rights movement. I'm just maybe more sensitized about the issue of conflict because Martin King had one position and I think that in many ways activists in the social struggle of the '60s postured where they were politically in relationship to where King was. SNCC tended to be to the left as was CORE. NAACP tended to be to the right. But this was a complementary struggle not orchestrated by the leadership, but it's the nature of struggle in and of itself—

[sound roll out]

[cut]

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[hand slate]

[change to sound roll 20]

Donaldson: Well to put it another way, it seems to me that what you had were creative tensions, conflicts. Not what I would consider traditional conflicts in the sense that SNCC was one place, SCLC was another, NAA and CORE. In fact, in Mississippi these four organizations created a coalition called the Council of Federated Organizations. Now there were politics involved in that. One was that SNCC, as a kind of raw edged radical agency, couldn't get certain kinds of funds that the NAACP could get. But they all agreed for mutual benefit to create this umbrella organization which Bob Moore, who was the SNCC director of Mississippi, headed and David Dennis, who was the CORE director of Mississippi, was the co-director of or the associate director of. On the local level, however, what's always interesting is that the local people—they weren't caught up into the problems of the national organizations and their fundraising campaigns in New York and Chicago about what they were doing in the South. They were for the workers, the Freedom Riders. In fact, when—during '61 and '62 whenever I went to a new community in Mississippi, people would say, why I just knew the Freedom Riders would finally get here. I mean you called yourself SNCC or CORE, they called you Freedom Fighters, Freedom Riders, everybody was the same to them. There were people who were there to help try and encourage change and I think that's really what was important.

00:10:39:00

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT, A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONAL LOGISTICAL STUFF THAT WENT ON IN SELMA AFTER THE FIRST, WELL, FIRST TELL ME, TELL ME, WHY WAS IT THAT JOHN LEWIS WAS THE ONLY ONE FROM SNCC ON THAT FIRST MARCH? WHAT WAS THAT, WHAT WAS THAT—ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS AROUND THAT?

Donaldson: On which first march?

INTERVIEWER 1: AT PETTIS BRIDGE?

Donaldson: Oh. Well, the Selma-Montgomery march has some history to it. SNCC was—had an organizing project, a literacy project and a voter registration project in Selma starting in late '61, but really developed in 1962. Colia Liddell and Lafayette, Bernard Lafayette were involved in running that project and then Maria Varela joined them over there at a later point in time and worked on the literacy program. It was in the traditional SNCC mode where you went in and you sought out people and you tried to organize a local base. There also was an SCLC affiliate in Selma run by Mrs. Boynton and the two groups worked in harmony. And after the Mississippi summer project and a number of other actions it became very important to the civil rights movement for major drama. These dramas usually were for the benefit of political leadership; the White House, the Congress, to force ahead the Voting Rights Act and SCLC decided that the drama from their point of view ought to be a Selma-Montgomery march with national personalities coming in from all over the country to join this march, etc., etc. The local organizers, activists within SCLC—excuse me, wanted to move ahead and do this march right away. As you had a tendency in the organization for the activists and the organizers who want to move fast and for the planners and the leadership to wanna maybe take a little bit more time to determine, what's the best way to do this? John Lewis—well, when SCLC decided to move ahead with the march there was some people in SNCC who felt that the March on Washington as a national drama point was not all it should have been and therefore they were a little bit turned off of any other major marches. There was a cynicism, everybody got their march, and SNCC in fact, in some ways the Selma march became identified with me. I was SNCC coordinator on the Selma-Montgomery march. John went over to join the demonstrators and to be SNCC's representative on the scene. That's why he was involved with Hosea Williams—not Hosea Williams—I can't remember who, but he was the co-partner in leading the first march to the Pettis Bridge that got turned around and violence occurred. That same afternoon Jim Forman sent up Courtland Cox, Stokely Carmichael, and myself to Selma to join with Silas Norman who was already on the scene and, I think, John Love to organize the SNCC outreach capabilities in Selma to create—

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[cut]

[wild audio]

Donaldson: —for a bigger and a broader platform for the march which came off the following week. And Willie Ricks and other organizers joined us.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT'D WE GOT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: RUN OUT.

00:13:59:00

[cut]

[hand slate]

Donaldson: So, John Lewis, in fact, wasn't really the only SNCC person that was in Selma at the time. The whole SNCC project was there involving about five or six other organizers. John as the chairman and as a national personality and the youngest speaker at the March on Washington was sort of commentated as a media personality in, in leadership of the march, but there were a lot of SNCC people there on the scenes.

00:14:24:00

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. TELL ME THIS, YOU SAID THAT FOLKS WERE DISILLUSIONED WITH THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON, DIDN'T THINK IT WAS ALL IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN OR COULD HAVE BEEN?

Donaldson: Right.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT—TELL ME ABOUT THAT. WHY, WHY WASN'T IT?

Donaldson: Well—

INTERVIEWER 1: OR WHAT WERE YOUR FELLINGS ABOUT?

Donaldson: I think the March on Washington, myself, was in fact what it was. Major demonstrations create a sense of, of anticipation that the millennium is forthcoming; that change is gonna be imminent. I think that there is a tendency by a lot of people on demonstrations like the March on Washington to build them into far more than they are. The March on Washington, by the leadership—the civil rights leadership conference that put it together and the coalition of civil rights organizations, was an attempt to put bring a greater pressure on the White House, at the White House's desire in many ways, for a greater punch and support for the civil rights legislation which was on the Hill. That was the reason it was organized. That was the reason it was pulled off. Jobs and freedom now and all the sloganeering. I think that a lot of people felt, because of the drama and the vast greatness of it all that somehow or another we had turned the mystical corner in the struggle and not necessarily the millennium was forthcoming, but that a new era of humanity and social consciousness and social justice was now on the table and that didn't happen. I think that frustrated a lot of people. There was always a dialogue both among SNCC activists within sectors of the nationalist community and demonstrations like this really did not accomplish much. They created a lot of hoopla, a lot of drama, but didn't accomplish much. There's some truths in what they say. There's also the fact that they do some education. They create some public awareness. So that the, the rhetoriticians and the activists are correct when they say there was no major accomplishment, because of the march. But at the same time it does represent a continuum and struggle and the need from time to time to create exclamation

points and question marks and commas so people can define themselves in some time frame which is also important to an organizer. To bring something to a culmination, to take people to a next step. So it was a cynicism, I think, and a frustration more than anything real.

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INTERVIEWER 1: WAS IT—I'VE HEARD IT SAID THAT IT WAS—THAT A LOT OF THE CYNICISM AND SO FORTH CAME OUT OF THE FACT THAT FOLKS THOUGHT THAT WHAT IT DID WAS IT SOLD MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. AS A, AS A LEADER AND A, AND A PROPHET AND NOT—AND DIDN'T DO SO MUCH FOR, FOR THE ISSUES THAT WERE INVOLVED.

Donaldson: Well, how do you separate one from the other? There's no question that the March on Washington clearly established Martin Luther King as a major personality in the American, you know, political scene. But what was that this personality symbolized? You know, this personality was about a social struggle, voter registration, civil rights, jobs, so that I can't separate them. I think that probably where the march may sometimes be historically distorted the fight of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the '64 Democratic Party Convention was more symbolic of a real political rift and a real political shift in the civil rights movement about the capability of traditional structures to change. The March on Washington was an advocacy program, a public rallying, while other things were an attempt for an institutional change and I think there's a big difference. It's hard to be critical of public advocacies and public rallying. It's the only way the public has to demonstrate, even in a hypocritical sense, that they're prepared to emotionally support something.

00:18:17:00

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU KNOW ANY—ABOUT ANY OF THE SPECIFIC PRESSURES PUT ON PEOPLE WHO WERE ON THE CREDENTIALS COMMITTEE AT THE—AT THAT CONVENTION?

Donaldson: Oh there was, I mean, the, the there was tremendous pressure put on members of the Credentials Committee. Key delegates there put on by the Vice President, excuse me. [pause] Put on by the Vice President, that's correct. Hubert Humphrey who Johnson was threatening possibly to drop from the ticket. Put on by the White House directly from the ticket put on by the White House directly from the President. Pressures put on by other elements of the Democratic Party. Namely Jack Pratt, who was General Counsel to the DNC at the same time he was General Counsel to the National Council of Churches, representing what we thought were movement issues, at the same time, representing what was a direct conflict, party issues. People were threatened. They had judgeships denied. Other little benefits that perks that go with being public personalities denied or provided. Edith Green, who was a very key person in the credentials fight, the congresswoman from Oregon was under tremendous pressures during that period of time by national elements within the party. And, of course, the delegates themselves from Mississippi, the Freedom Democratic delegates, who were being carved up by all kinds of forces asking them to accept compromises or to go home and, you know, let the party take care of these matters. It was a

tough fight and a symbolic fight and that—in many ways, I think, a turning point in the civil rights movement.

INTERVIEWER 1: CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

[cut]

00:20:13:00

[hand slate]

Donaldson: [whispers] Sorry about that.

INTERVIEWER 1: [laughs] OK, TELL US, TELL US ABOUT SELMA.

INTERVIEWER 2: I'M SORRY.

Donaldson: Selma, why Selma—

INTERVIEWER 1: AND THE LOGISTICS—

Donaldson: I don't know her.

INTERVIEWER 1: —OF ORGANIZING FOR THE MARCH AND ANY LITTLE.

Donaldson: I'm not gonna get into that—I'm not going to—no, no, no, no, I have to save those things for—

INTERVIEWER 2: SELMA?

Donaldson: No, no, no, no, for others who tell anecdotes [laughs] in a humorous mood. The—I'm not sure that there's much, you know, more to add in terms of, you know, organizing a march. It was a collective effort between both the SCLC and SNCC with SCLC playing the predominant leadership role and in many ways organized very similarly to the March on Washington. The difference, primarily—this was a march in the Deep South. There was danger, there was hostility, there were elements of hostility in the March on Washington, but this was in a totally hostile environment in the sense that we're—you're traveling from Selma in Dallas County up to Montgomery. And so, there was a great deal of concern about security—about visibility was important in Selma because with visibility as with any demonstration in the South came a sense of false security in the sense that there was a belief by most people in the movement that if you could be on the front pages of the paper, on the Daily News, have the attention of the Federal Government, had the attention of the American public in general, the likelihood of hostilities were minimized and in some ways, whether myth or not, there were a lot of truths that seemed to work out that way. You know,

that there was a tendency of the local sheriffs and militia forces and white citizens groups, Klan, and what have you, to not be as visceral and as physical in their violence on people when things had major personalities involved. But the detail of organizing the march, you know, is kind of routine in a sense. You know, you put out a call. There's phone calling involved of organizations, locations for people to stay, camps to be located, cause this was a major march where people camped out at night and, you know, all of the intrigues which were involved with that.

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INTERVIEWER 1: NOW, YOU SAID YOU DIDN'T HAVE ANY PARTICULAR ANECDOTES?

Donaldson: Well, I leave the anecdotes for humorous like—[laughs] no, I leave the anecdotes for others to tell. They, they—there are entertainers and there are serious students of history. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER 1: CUT.

[cut]

00:23:05:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED.

[hand slate]

INTERVIEWER 1: HOW MANY TIMES DID YOU DRIVE THAT ROAD?

Donaldson: [laughs]

INTERVIEWER 2: DON'T LAUGH.

Donaldson: Oh, you switched gears on me. The—why I made about thirty odd round trips to Louisville, to Detroit. Round trip from Clarksville [sic] and Greenwood, you know, back and forth and also to Chicago during that period. In fact, one of the interesting points of history about the, the food drive was that a prominent young black comedian named Dick Gregory got involved with the movement and it totally changed his life and the food drive was what—was the turning point in his life. Dick Gregory, Harry Belafonte, and Sidney Poitier came to Greenwood and Gregory bought all these turkeys down from Chicago. And Dick became quite a politicized person from that experience and became quite involved with SNCC, a little side point.

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INTERVIEWER 1: TELL ME ABOUT HARRY BELAFONTE'S GIFT. HOW MUCH

DID HE GIVE AND WHEN AND WHAT, WHAT SIGNIFICANCE WAS IT?

Donaldson: Well, Belafonte was at different points in SNCC's history very important to, to the organization. One, Belafonte played a mediating role often times between frustrations that developed between the leadership personalities of SNCC and the leadership personalities of SCLC. He was very fond of Dr. King, a close personal advisor of King, and a close friend, and he was also fond of Forman, of McDoo [sic] and of other personalities in, in SNCC and he often brought them together. In 1961, Belafonte gave, I think, twenty-twenty five thousand dollars to the organization; it was his first single largest gift. I mean the organization's proud of it because it came from a black, you know, American. And secondly, SNCC had been getting, you know, a dollar here, a hundred dollars there—it was just a major significance to the organization he thought enough of it, enough importance about what they were doing to make such a donation at that time. And, I mean, there's a whole history, I think, in terms of Belafonte's involvement with SNCC and with SCLC during the period of '61, '62, '63, '64, '65. In fact, Belafonte organized the entertainment for the 1965 Selma—Montgomery march and put together the entire night activity that took place in Montgomery the night the march came into town or the night before at St. Jude's.

00:25:35:00

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. AND SO WHAT HAPPENED IN THIS MEETING IN GREENVILLE BEFORE THE SUMMER OF '64?

Donaldson: Well, there had been a great deal of dialogue within SNCC about the nature of the summer project. The SNCC executive committee and the national leadership, the Atlanta based national leadership, by and large were strong advocates for a summer project. And Bob Moses, the Director of the Mississippi summer project, was also an org—a supporter of this. People felt that it would bring greater visibility, greater resources, and allow for an impact that could not happen by any other mode. Prior to that summer project, sometime, I think, in the very early spring Bob convened a staff meeting of all the field secretaries—no I'm wrong. Sometime that winter, the winter of '63, '64, there was a staff meeting held in Greenville. I, I say winter because it was a warm day, but I'm pretty sure it was in the winter and—to talk about the summer project. Now there was a great deal of resistance from the Mississippi staff about the summer project on a lot of scores. Some of them historical, some of them concerned about the fundamentals of organizing. The SNCC staff in Mississippi along with staff from other organizations that were there, there were people who really operated within the SNCC aura in many ways in Mississippi-resisted the summer project on a number of accounts. One, a lot of organizers felt that if you had whites in the state it would make it more difficult to organize and there were principle differences there. People felt if you had sophisticated, young white college kids organizing in the state that that would, in some ways, take away responsibilities that local community people were doing and doing well. That the issue was whether or not you wanted a letter typed efficiently, efficient, efficiently or whether you wanted to get people to begin to participate in doing things which affected organizational building, outreach, you know, and all of the intimacies which go on with building community organizations and community institutions. So that there was some serious concerns and some people felt it was, you know, kind of a Pied Piper thing, you

know. It'd be sudden, it'd be over, it'd be glamorous, but that you get these nice middle class kids, white kids, from all over the country coming to Mississippi and the question is how productive would that be. And there was critical concern. People felt that there were areas of Mississippi you couldn't go in with white people and that you know SNCC staff people could get killed, CORE people, NAACP people, and there was a lot of concern about it, and a lot of resistance to it. In fact, if—I don't remember if there was a formal vote, but I would say in retrospect, a feeling that if there was not a formal vote, there was a clear consensus within the Mississippi staff of SNCC resistance to this program. The SNCC executive committee met later on and reversed the general direction Mississippi staff was in. In behalf of going forward, the project. And Bob pretty much led people to accept his decision that that's what we need to do and that was the way to go. But there was clearly concern that this project might be too much, too overwhelming, and maybe not leave enough substance in the kind of work that organizers need to do which is slow and tedious and painful and also quite life threatening, you know, in the Mississippi of 1963.

INTERVIEWER 1: CUT.

00:29:21:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Donaldson: When Charlie—I'll tell you the story—

[cut]

00:29:24:00

Donaldson: —when Charlie stopped smiling.

[hand slate]

INTERVIEWER 2: THAT'S THE BEST STORY. I'VE THOUGHT ABOUT THAT STORY.

Donaldson: No, fear was always a, a major reality that you had to live with and, you know, you learned how to live with it, how to function with it. Almost every organizer in the Deep South constantly was faced with harassment. They'd been beaten up. They'd been shot at. Some were shot. I remember Charlie Cobb, who was—and I who were active organizers along the river for a long time in Mississippi and the Delta counties. Charlie is a very happy, sophisticated poet who is always in an upward kind of attitude. Always smiling. One of the few times I think in four or five years I ever saw Charlie stop smiling; we were coming out of Myersville, Mississippi we were trying to make a telephone call in the Jackson—we were having trouble. In fact, we were in serious trouble. And they had party lines and I was on the phone with Jackson trying to tell 'em that I was having this trouble and we were going to be

late getting in. And Charlie came and whispered in my ear that this is a party line, the police are listening, let's get out of here. So we left the store jumped in the car and were heading down the road and a pick up came up behind us and I think they popped off a couple of shots and I looked at Charlie and he was deadly serious. There was no smile on Charlie's face; he was sitting tensely in his seat ready for us to roll. And I mean for us, thinking about it and dealing with that night in Jackson in the office, you know, we laughed about it but I mean it was an everyday kind of occurrence that just somehow, but every once in a while they catch up with you and you had to figure out a way to gird it into your system and you move on. If you showed fear, it affected the community around you so you had to show this was just a regular part of life. And people, if they saw you had confidence, they developed confidence and it was important for an organizer never to transmit fear to anybody even though there was a lot of it there and we all knew about it.

00:31:19:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

INTERVIEWER 2: THANK YOU, THAT'S JUST WHAT I—

Donaldson: The Billups gas station. Something never to be forgotten.

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT HAPPENED?

INTERVIEWER 2: SO WHAT HAPPENED?

Donaldson: Well, I think there were—I mean, we took Bob to the airport, he had to make a trip to New York and we left the airport coming back and I think, I don't know whether we stopped at the gas station or were pulled over by police into the gas station and this is a, a "Fill Up at Billups," you know, very popular in Mississippi. And I was driving the car and the police came over. They asked me to get out of the car. They looked for the ID. They searched us and stuff. There were I think three or four of us. Charlie Cobb was with me. I think Jesse Jackson and there may have been somebody else, and they told the others to get back into the car, you know, after a little needling and heckling and some profanity and jabbing them and stuff. I got back into the, the back seat of the police car and the guy in the front seat, a big fat—every stereotype that you can imagine of a southern, redneck sheriff was epitomized in this guy, or in my theory epitomized him in it and that's what I saw when I looked at him. And he called me every kind of nigger he could think of and then, finally, he said, nigger, I'm gonna kill you here tonight. And, you know, you kind of say well, sure, you mean—it's all rhetoric. They all go through it and you just figure out, you know, it'll be a half hour of amusement on their part and then they'll probably take you off and throw you in Hines County Jail or Brandon County Jail, but he didn't do that. He pulled out his gun. He cocked it and he put it in my mouth and for a moment, I mean, I was absolutely para—I said,

this guy—in my head I said, this guy is cracked—shoot me here in the middle of the night. And what am I doing here, is what I said to myself. You know, and the other cop came in, stuck his head in the window and said, you can't kill that nigger here, not right now. And the guy pulled the gun out of my face and put the hammer back down and in the process whacked me across my right arm, I mean, my right hand. You know, I mean really gave me—told me to get my black so and so out of the car and I went back to where the other guys were and I mean I think I cranked it up. And for one of the few times for me, you know, I mean I think I felt really shaken by the experience and I mean I put my hand on the driver's—I mean I couldn't do anything. I mean I was shaking; I just kind of sat there. I think everyone kind of empathized with me for a few minutes as I got myself back together and then we went on back in and, you know, and like everything else became another tale. But for those few short seconds, I mean, I actually thought this guy was gonna blow me away. [laughs] And I said, he can't be serious, you know, but he was and, you know, I had no doubt. I mean you could see his finger tightening around the trigger, you know, and this guy came in and said, well, you know, just this casual remark. Well you can't blow that nigger away here. You know, like, it'd been OK if it had been off the side of the road someplace, but it was in the gas station. It was inconveniencing [sic], you know, and messy, you know. I mean, because if he had pulled the trigger, literally would have blown my head off because he had the gun right up on my lips. You know, a nice big fat forty-five which looks bigger than it is when [laughs] it's right in front of you, but then you see the bullets you know going around. I mean your mind focuses on strange things too at that point in time. But I mean there was a lot of that that went on, you know, and basically I think that—you learned how to tolerate it, really, in so many ways and you learned how to absorb it. That's one of the few times I think that it really bothered me. That really got to me. By and large you weren't even conscious of the danger ‘til later on. You know, you thought about it, but you never allowed your mind to focus on it. You had so much to do, so much to be involved with that you just didn't focus on fear because it could get the better of you. So people, I think, who survived the best kept their mind to work and to struggle and to the task at hand and allow the moments that were threatening and fearful to go by. The most difficult time probably is when you didn't have the option like when you were in jail; if you were in jail with a group, you could survive anything. They could beat you up all day long, it didn't make any difference, you know. You—in fact, there was a pride in not letting them break your will when you were by yourself it was tougher, but also, you know, I remembered in—I was in Parchman that it became a point of will to me to never ever let a trustee, a jailer, you know, ever see fear in my eyes. Just wasn't gonna do it, you know. It was just important that they couldn't intimidate me no matter how intimidating [sic] [laughs] I felt I was—you know it was happening. But was a mess. Charlie can tell you a couple stories of the time when they got shot at up there in Greenville when they were about to arrest you, in fact, they did arrest you—

[cut]

[end of interview]

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