

Interview with **Unita Blackwell**

May 7, 1986

Production Team: 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*.

00:00:01:00

[camera roll 428]

[sound roll 1364]

[slate]

Blackwell: Yeah.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: MARK IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: ROLL 428, MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO HELP ME TO UNDERSTAND THE LIFE HERE THAT MISSISSIPIANS HAD [TRUCK PASSES] [INAUDIBLE] AND IT BEING HOME TO— TELL ME WHAT MISSISSIPI IS HOME TO?

Blackwell: Well, Mississippi, you know, people want to know why we are still here and why do we stay here? But Mississippi is home. It's, it's a place where I was born, reared on the land. The land is important to us. It was, it was the mean of the hard work, but it, it made us angry, it made us happy, it made us all these things, you know but, but we was connected with the land. Because we as black people, in the state of Mississippi, especially in the Mississippi Delta worked the land. We didn't own the land but, but we worked the land and so everything was tied around this land. And I feel that that's the reason why I love Mississippi. Is, it's ours.

00:01:24:00

INTERVIEWER: ALL RIGHT SO YOU LIVED IN THIS LAND AND, AND, AND YOU GREW UP HERE BUT YOU LIVED UNDER A PRETTY OPPRESSIVE RULING BODY, I MEAN. DESCRIBE FOR ME THE FIRST TIME THAT YOU SAW OR YOU RECOG— YOU SAW FREEDOM WO—WORKERS AS YOU CALLED THEM FREEDOM RIDERS. TELL ME ABOUT THAT, WHEN, WHEN YOU SAW THEM, WHEN YOU REALIZED THAT MISSISSIPPI WAS GOING TO BE TOUCHED BY [INAUDIBLE]?

Blackwell: Well, the first time—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: STOP, I'M SORRY.

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: BUT I WANT YOU—I CAN REMEMBER READING AND YOU, YOU TOLD ABOUT THE FIRST TIME—

[cut]

Blackwell: What we can do—hold it.

[cut]

00:02:15:00

[slate]

[bird calls in background]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: MARK IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: OK SO, SO, TELL ME WHEN YOU FIRST SAW CIVIL RIGHTS WORKERS COME INTO THE STATE AND WHAT THAT MEANT TO YOU AS A LOCAL MISSISSIPPIAN?

Blackwell: As, as a local Mississippian, in 1964, because we had heard about it in 1963, that they were supposed to have these Freedom Riders, that's what we called it coming to Mississippi. And nobody thought they would ever show up, you know, everybody talked about it, maybe they would come to Jackson or someplace like that. But my personal experience was that I, I didn't think they would ever show up in Mayersville, Mississippi, a

little small town in the Mississippi Delta. It wasn't even a town at that time you know, we, we, we calls it, you know, Mayersville.

00:03:23:00

INTERVIEWER: AND THEN THEY SHOWED UP?

Blackwell: Yeah, they came. And it was two guys, two black fellows and they went down to Henry Sais' house. Henry Sais was a man that it was rumored that he was involved in the civil right movement, that he was a person that was in the NAACP and at that time you, you know, it was very bad to be in the NAACP because you could get killed for being in anything, far as that concerned. But they came through here walking to this town and they was walking down the road and, I knew they were different, because they was walking fast, And we didn't walk fast at that time and they just says—waved at, you know, and says, hello. You know, we didn't say that either. We always says, how y'all feeling? And so we knew that that had to be some of them. And that evening we saw the, the highway patrols and police coming off the highway looking around and stuff like that so we, we had an idea that this must be some of these Freedom Riders. And—

00:04:54:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO THEY'RE HERE. WH—ONCE THEY GOT HERE, WHAT MADE YOU THEN GET INVOLVED WITH THEM?

Blackwell: Well, they came to our church.

INTERVIEWER: SORRY, WHEN YOU SAY THEY, TELL ME WHO THEY ARE, OK?

Blackwell: The, the, the Freedom Riders which Bob and Robert says that they were coming over to the church and they came to Sunday school that morning and they were pointing the finger at me and saying that just like that lady talking back there in the Sunday school class that God help those who help themselves, and you can help yourself by trying to register to vote. And so he got up and talked, but that's the first time in my life that I ever come in contact with anybody that tells me that I had the right to register to vote. And that was my beginning of getting involved in so they said we goin' to have another meeting and they had that on Thursday. Bob and, and Robert came up and, and so they said that, let's, let's find out who want to go to the courthouse and try to register to vote. And I stood up to say I would be one of the people. And there was eight of us that said that we would go and try to register to vote. And *I was asked, would I join the SNCC, which was Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and I said, yes. And they said, well what you, what do I have to do? And they said, just try to encourage people to go and try to register, go over to the courthouse. And that was my start of going around here to my neighbors and friends and asking them, you know, would they come and go to the courthouse and try to register to vote.*

00:06:51:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW FOR BLACK MISSISSIPPIANS AT THAT TIME, THAT WAS A PRETTY DANGEROUS THING TO DO. WHAT DID IT MEAN FOR YOU TO GO DOWN TO VOTE, OR TO TRY TO REGISTER TO VOTE AT THAT TIME?

Blackwell: Well, it wasn't easy, to try to get people to come out to go and try to register to vote because the first time that we went, we had a circle around the courthouse of, of pickup trucks and rifles and white people getting ready to stop us from going into the courthouse. And we stayed in the courthouse, you know, all day long trying to get registered to vote. And only four people got in that whole day. That kind of a thing and it started a whole process here in this area and in the whole Delta.

00:07:49:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT KIND OF PROCESS?

Blackwell: And that process was that *people were being put off the plantations, people were threatened* with their, jobs *folks was put in jail*. I got arrested several times. Sometimes I got arrested every day. Because the harassment started, you know, *just because we wanted people to try to register to vote*.

00:08:20:00

INTERVIEWER: WOULD IT, WHAT DID THE VOTE, WHY WAS IT SO—WHAT DID THE VOTE MEAN FOR BLACK PEOPLE OF THE TIME IN MISSISSIPPI?

Blackwell: Well I, I—the white people knew what it meant. The black folks didn't know that much what it meant. I was only told when I started off that if I registered to vote that I would have food to eat and a better house to stay in, 'cause the one I was staying in was so raggedy you could see anywhere and look outdoors. That I would have—my child would have a better education. And at that particular point, our children only went to school two to three months out of the year. That was what we were told, it was the basis, needs of the people. And for the whites, they understood it even larger than that in terms of political power, and we hadn't even heard that word political power, because it wasn't even taught in the black schools. We didn't know it was such thing as a, a Board of Supervisors and what they did and School Board members and what they did and even the Mayor, I mean my mother has never thought in terms that, that I would, you know, ever be anything, so nobody's, you know, never thought about any of those things.

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

[cut]

00:09:54:00

[slate]

INTERVIEWER: WHAT I WANT TO DO, IS I WANT TO GET BACK TO—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: —AND HELP ME UNDERSTAND [INAUDIBLE] TELL ME ABOUT PEOPLE IN MISSISSIPPI AND WHERE THEY FOUND THAT COURAGE.

Blackwell: Don't know. They don't talk about it.

INTERVIEWER: IS IT GOD? IS IT...IS IT JUST—

Blackwell: Well, we can talk about it.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'RE ROLLING.

INTERVIEWER: OK, TELL ME—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE ARE ROLLING NOW.

00:10:23:00

INTERVIEWER: —TELL ME. OK, WHERE DID THEY FIND THE COURAGE?

Blackwell: Well, you want me to start now?

INTERVIEWER: MM-HMM.

Blackwell: I feel that the courage of, of black people in Mississippi and maybe Mississippians in general, but I can talk about what happened to black people and the courage to, to go and try to register to vote. It was, what I always said, was nothing from nothing leaves nothing. We didn't have nothing. And if we tried to get something and didn't get it, you know, we hadn't lost nothing. And the courage come out of trying to take a chance to get a better life for ourselves and—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Blackwell: —for our children. And we didn't have anything.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S CUT PLEASE. WE'RE GOING TO DO THIS AGAIN, OK? WE, WE HAVE A LIGHT PROBLEM.

[cut]

00:11:20:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: ROLL 429, MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: OK SO, WHAT WE'RE GOING TO DO IS, IS BEGIN TO TALK AGAIN ABOUT COURAGE AND YOU WERE TELLING ME ABOUT NOTHING FROM NOTHING—

Blackwell: Mm-hmm.

INTERVIEWER: —AND WHAT THAT, WHAT THAT MEANS IN TERMS OF THEN TAKING ACTION, SO I WANT TO GET—HELP ME BY TALKING ABOUT PEOPLE IN MISSISSIPPI, OK?

Blackwell: People in Mississippi, especially black people, when we talked about courage and where do we get our courage from in the beginning of, of the movement, we—I would always say that nothing from nothing leaves nothing. And we didn't have nothing. And [missing frames] *I guess our courage came out because we didn't have nothing, that we couldn't lose nothing. But we wanted something for ourselves and for our children. And so we took a chance with our lives* because I said, we was already, you know walking around dead, because we didn't have a life we just was existing. And they bought it, I mean, you know, when we would get out and talk about this, say, that's right. I mean, really and, and it came up out of that, it came up out of the necessities of life, that we were missing. And so the courage came from that. Another thing a lot of people that we talked to, `cause I was teaching Sunday school at the time when the guy came in talking about what we were going to do around voter registration. And God help those who help themselves, and that's one of the things we kept talking about in organizing people to go out to try to register to vote. It was all organized around the basic things that we understood, like the people in Mississippi Delta knows a lot about God and church, what the Bible say and we saw it as our strength, and we didn't have nothing, you know, and so that's the way we went at it, nothing from nothing leaves nothing. And ever what we do, we going to be better off.

00:13:49:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, SPEAKING ABOUT THAT COURAGE AND THE IDEA OF WHAT YOU COULD LOSE, BECAUSE YOU COULD LOSE YOUR LIFE, HOW DID, WHAT, WHAT HA—HOW DID PEOPLE RESPOND TO SOMEONE LIKE MEDGAR EVERS AND HIS DEATH AT THAT TIME? WHAT DID THAT SAY TO BLACK MISSISSIPPIANS AT THAT TIME?

Blackwell: We were always knowing that death was always around. That's, [car horn] that's the strangest thing I suppose for a lot of people to understand about us, that we always knew

that death was always near, [car approaches] that it was always something.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU START AGAIN, PLEASE? LET'S START THIS AGAIN.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: STOP.

[cut]

00:14:34:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: MARK IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #3: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: SO WHAT WE WERE TALKING ABOUT, WE WERE TALKING ABOUT THAT PEOPLE HERE IN MISSISSIPPI, THEY UNDERSTOOD THAT, THEY RECOGNIZED THAT PEOPLE OUTSIDE DIDN'T NECESSARILY...

Blackwell: Now people outside of the state doesn't really understand like what happened to Medgar Evers you know, it saddened all of us, and, but we know death is always around with the struggle that, that we were in, that it was always the chance that your life was the ultimate price. And that had happened to us all the time, I mean people were going to jail, people were being beat, people were being killed and some of them were just being killed we know about, I know about people that's been killed, and they wasn't doing voter registration work, they just was black. And said something wrong to a white person. Or, lift up their head and tried to be a person. And they tried to make 'em put their hat on their head and you know, and take it off and all this kind of stuff, and beat 'em to death. So we, we live in that and it was something that I guess every time one died, we reinforced it by making sure that we gonna make it.

INTERVIEWER: NOW, LET'S STOP FOR A SECOND, PLEASE.

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: NOW, ABOUT FREEDOM SUMMER OR SOMETHING—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #3: READY?

INTERVIEWER: —SHOULD HAPPEN.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: #3: YOU READY ORLANDO?

INTERVIEWER: YES.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: ARE WE STILL ROLLING?

[cut]

00:16:23:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WHAT I'D LIKE YOU—TELL ME WHAT YOU, WHAT YOU THINK THE FREEDOM SUMMER DID FOR THE PEOPLE OF MISSISSIPPI?

Blackwell: Well, I think for, for us, for me and for people that in a whole, the Free—

INTERVIEWER: START AGAIN AND SAY FOR BLACK PEOPLE IN MISSISSIPPI.

Blackwell: Mm-hmm. For, for black people in Mississippi, it was a beginning of a whole new era.

INTERVIEWER: LET'S CUT, PLEASE.

[cut]

00:16:59:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: MARK IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: OK, TELL ME WHAT THE FREEDOM SUMMER DID FOR BLACK PEOPLE IN MISSISSIPPI.

Blackwell: The Freedom Summer for black people in Mississippi was a beginning of, of this era or century of, of trying to free ourselves from being oppressed in the situation that we were in, in the state of Mississippi. It was, it was a very necessary beginning in, in especially for those of us who was involved, saw it as an ongoing situation. But—

00:17:49:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW, HOW WAS IT A VEHICLE TO, TO FIGHT OPPRESSION THERE IN MISSISSIPPI? TELL ME HOW.

Blackwell: Because people feel that they wasn't just helpless anymore, that, that they had come together and, and we had black and white that had come from the North and from the West and from, even some cities in the South, these students came and, and we wasn't a closed society anymore. They came to, to talk about that we had a right to register to vote; we had a right to stand up for our rights and these kinds of things, and that's a whole new era for us. I mean hadn't anybody said that to us in, in that open way like, like what happened in, in 1964, that was the Freedom Summer.

00:18:42:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, NOW DURING THAT SUMMER BLACKS, I MEAN WHITES LIVED IN THE HOMES OF, OF BLACK FAMILIES, FREEDOM VOLUNTEERS CAME AND LIVED IN THE HOMES OF, OF BLACK MISSISSIPIANS. WHAT DID THAT EXPERIENCE DO? WHAT DID PEOPLE LEARN? WHAT DID BLACK MISSISSIPIANS LEARN FROM THOSE STAYING WITH THEM AND WHAT DO YOU THINK THAT THOSE STAYING WITH THE BLACK MISSISSIPIANS MIGHT HAVE LEARNED, WHAT WAS THE EXPERIENCE?

Blackwell: Well, you know, one of the things that was interesting for a lot of the whites that came they felt that they had to you know, not clean up and clean themselves up. And that that was the way that it was, you know, they learned that black people were poor, but also that they liked to clean up, clean up their houses, clean up whatever they had they learned to— black people learned the interaction of, of whites, would eat with them, you know, and *I remember cooking some pinto beans, and that's all we had, and everybody just got around the pot, you know, and that was an experience, you know, just to see white people, you know, coming around the pot and getting a, a bowl and putting some stuff in, and then sitting around talking, and sitting on the floor, sitting anywhere, 'cause, you know, wasn't any great dining room tables and stuff that we had been used to working in the white people houses, and go in there and find them all sitting, you know, and everybody sitting, and they'd ring a bell or something and tap, and you'd come in and bring the stuff and put it around. But this, you was sitting in the floor and they was talking and, you know, we was sitting there laughing, and I guess they became very real and very human, we each to one another.* It was an experience that I guess will, you know centuries and centuries, that will last a lifetime.

INTERVIEWER: OK. COULD WE CUT FOR A QUICK SECOND, PLEASE?

[cut]

00:20:36:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: MARK IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: OK TELL ME, TELL ME ABOUT FANNIE LOU HAMER.

Blackwell: You know, Fannie Lou Hamer when, and you, when I think of Fannie Lou Hamer, I think of her sitting in her house in Ruleville. She loved to cook and we had a lot of different dishes and like greens and beans and stuff like that you know, and she cooked big pots of stuff and I think of her as full of laughter, she was very full of humor about her situation. I would be, I was, you know, be very, I would be so mad because something would be done happened that night or that day or whatever, and that we would end up laughing about it. But she, she could see humor in, in anything, you know and, and that's the way I, I, I think about her. You know, she would, somebody would take us or take us to jail and she would say, did you see his eyes, you know, and say, his eyes were just gleaming you know. And say, his lip was just quivering you know. And says, honey, he was so mad he was about to have a stroke, and I was so tickled, hoping that he would, you know, and we, we, you know, it's that kind of feeling that you have about Ms. Hamer, she gets you out of, of your anger, and into looking at the anger and—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Blackwell: —the sickness of what was happening to us, that it was a sick situation. She was—

INTERVIEWER: HOLD ON—

[cut]

00:22:32:00

[camera roll 430]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: ROLL 430, MARKER.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: STAND BY FOR FOCUS. OK.

INTERVIEWER: MRS. HAMER USED TO SAY A LOT, SHE HAD SOMETHING SHE SAID, I'M TIRED OF BEING SICK AND TIRED, WHAT DID IT MEAN WHEN SHE'D SAY THAT, WHAT DID IT MEAN IN TERMS OF BLACK MISSISSIPIANS?

[INAUDIBLE]

Blackwell: Well, Ms. Hamer always said that she was tired of being sick and tired. From— for us it was it was a courage standpoint. It was—if you was sick and tired of being sick and tired, you were going to rise up and do something. And that's one of the, you know, the way we took it most of the time. And she said, I just got sick and tired of being sick and tired. And you knew that we were sick and tired of being sick and tired, and so that's the way she trained us, you know, that you get sick and tired of being sick and tired, and you had to get up and do something. And that was our action, it was an action point, Instead of you know, just being a, it wasn't anything for you just to lay back, you know. It was a courage, it was a point of, move out. Mm-hmm.

00:23:59:00

INTERVIEWER: IN A—YOU WERE, YOU WERE A PART OF THE MFDP CHALLENGE, YOU WOULD GOING TO ATLANTIC CITY, YOU WERE ON THE BUS TO ATLANTIC CITY.

Blackwell: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: NOW WHEN THAT BUS WAS ON ITS WAY TO ATLANTIC CITY, WHAT WAS THE FEELING ON THE BUS? DID PEOPLE FEEL LIKE THEY WERE LIVING IN THIS CHALLENGE, DID THEY, TELL ME, TELL ME ABOUT THAT RIDE, TELL ME WHAT PEOPLE WERE—

Blackwell: The bus ride to Atlantic City, New Jersey, was full of I say, enthusiasm that we had done this, we had had our own elections. We had got our delegates, and we were going to challenge. It was something different and new and I can remember one man on then, he was supposed to have been nonviolent, but he was sitting there with an old rusty gun and he said well, if the Klans come at us, I think that's when I'm going to have to take care of business this time. But we, we were going with that feeling of nonviolent, but trying to, to see what could we get? And we were, when we left Jackson, Mississippi, to go out, pick up people and head towards Atlantic City, we went to saying we were coming at all of the seats or half, no compromise. And we kept that.

00:25:49:00

INTERVIEWER: YEAH BUT AT THAT POINT, YOU HAD NO SENSE OF A COMPROMISE, THAT WASN'T A PART OF—

Blackwell: No, it was, it was always discussed and people were talking about that we wouldn't take anything less. We didn't even know what we were going to be offered, but we were told this in our caucus before we left, suppose they offer you something less? And we said, no.

00:26:18:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID YOU WANT? WHAT WOULD, WHAT WOULD—

Blackwell: We wanted half of the seats. That was the, the last part. We wanted all of the seats or half, of the delegation that was representing the state of Mississippi in Atlantic City, New Jersey. But we didn't even get in, you know, they had us outside, the Democratic party, we was all around and, but that's the first time I ever went to caucus with a delegation and all this kind of stuff so that was within itself, was a whole learning experience for me, and for all of us, 'cause none of us had ever had to go and meet with a delegation and, I went and met with the Iowa delegation and somebody else went and met with different ones and—

00:27:04:00

INTERVIEWER: WELL, LET ME ASK YOU SOMETHING. A, AS A—WHAT DID, WHAT DID THAT, WHAT DID MISSISSIPPI PEOPLE WHO, SOME WERE SHARECROPPERS IN THE ROOM, PEOPLE WHO HAD NEVER REALLY BEEN INVOLVED IN THE NATIONAL POLITICAL SCENE, GOING TO CHALLENGE THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY. WHAT DID THAT, DID IT, WHAT DID THAT MEAN TO MISSISSIPPI BACK HERE WHO DIDN'T GO WITH YOU? WHAT, WHAT DID YOU REPRESENT TO THEM? IF YOU COULD—

Blackwell: For a lot of people, they couldn't understand it, you know, what, if you said just to everyday folks, they knew that we were, it was like a protest.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU START AGAIN? YOU GOT TO TELL ME WHAT IT IS.

Blackwell: OK. They couldn't understand the, the challenge that we were making to the Democratic party because we had never been involved in a democratic process or any kind of process, any party, which was Democratic party, Republican party or any party—we had formed a Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and this was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party that was going to Atlantic City, New Jersey, making the challenge to the Democratic party, the regular Democratic party, of the state of Mississippi. And so the people in Mississippi the sharecroppers, or the people who you know, worked and so on—didn't, they didn't fully understand that this time in history, that we were making, but we did it.

00:28:35:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW WAS IT THAT YOU WERE LOOKING FOR SEATS OR WERE YOU LOOKING FOR RECOGNITION? WAS THE—DID THE SEAT RECO— REPRESENT RECOGNITION OR, OR...?

Blackwell: Well, one of the things that when we would sit in we had the big wheels to come and talk to us, we said big wheels, we talking about heads of organizations at that time the black organizations, that would come and talk to us and talk about you know, why don't we take maybe a few seats, maybe a couple of seats. That would show that we did challenge and that, that we did get something. And we came back to that saying again, nothing from nothing leaves nothing. And if we go back with two seats, to us it don't mean nothing. And

the seats represented that we, as a people, because, see, votes was tied to more than just saying—we going down to vote. Vote was tied to, is our children going to be bet—better educated? Votes was tied to, is we going to live in better houses? Have a job? Or, even where are we going to stay? Because we were going to be thrown off the plantations. And you know, when we got back to Mississippi, you know, we were going to be put off, and people were. When we got back, you know, folks was out of a job. I haven't had a job since 1964 by the white folks' standards. They took away the, the, the job. And they gonna make sure that we were not going to get those jobs. That's what we were dealing with, when we talk about seats. Seats was our livelihood, it was our everything—

[cut]

00:30:30:00

[sound roll change to 1365]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: MARK IT, PLEASE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: MARKER.

Blackwell: You want me to change legs? I had to change them. Ok, you get up here. Thank you, start up here.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WHEN THE, THE—YOU HAD THAT CHALLENGE IN ATLANTIC CITY AND YOU COME BACK TO MISSISSIPPI, WHAT IS THE, WHAT IS THE NEXT STEP FOR MISSISSIPPI? WHAT'S AFTER THAT?

Blackwell: Well, when we were coming back, we were discussing organizing, you know, how will we continue. Ms. Hamer and I was talking and she would say, you know, I did the right thing, I know I did the right thing because it was her choice to make, as the vice chair of the party, of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, 'cause Lawrence Guyot, they had put him in jail before we left, and come up with some trumped up charges because they thought he wasn't going to go. And so that made Ms. Hamer, was the next one in charge, and he was a man, and this, the whole thing around, you know, they just knew that this wasn't going to pass off, but she had to make, we all said, you know, you make the decision. And so we sit in the balcony in the church there and decided in Atlantic City, New Jersey, you know, what was going to happen. Bob Moses, [car horn in background] was sitting there, Bob Moses, Ms. Hamer and I, and she says, I will not take the compromise. And—

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY, CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT

[cut]

00:32:04:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: MARK IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: MARKER

INTERVIEWER: OK, NOW PICKING UP THERE...

Blackwell: Yeah and Ms., you know, Ms. Hamer had made the decision and we all said OK, you know, we all voted and that's what happened. And we got on our two buses and headed back—

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY, I'M GOING TO START YOU AGAIN, PICKING UP WITH YOU AND BOB AND MS. HAMER SITTTNG THERE AT THE CHURCH.

Blackwell: Yeah, well, what happened was that it was discussion of, just before, whether we were going to take the compromise or not. And different ones had come to talk to us and leaders of heads of organizations. But Ms. Hamer, Bob Moses and myself were sitting in the balcony at the church there we were meeting at and, and she said she would not take the compromise. And then the press had to pick that up and take it and some people thought we was kind of silly, a bunch, of cotton choppers and so on, from Mississippi, you know, done turned down two seats at large, that's what they told us they would give us. And we came back to Mississippi with, hanging over our head that they was going to put us in jail because we used the name Democrat when we formed our party and they said that was illegal.

[cut]

[wild audio]

Blackwell: We came back—

INTERVIEWER: STOP, WE [INAUDIBLE]

[cut]

00:33:42:00

[change to camera roll 431]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: MARK IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: ROLL 431, MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: THERE WERE PEOPLE WHO SAID THAT YOU WOULD BE HATED WHEN YOU GOT BACK HOME BECAUSE YOU CAME BACK WITH NOTHING AND YOU HAD SAID SOMETHING LIKE, YOU WERE GOING HOME WITH SOMETHING, THAT YOU WERE GOING HOME WITH OUR DIGNITY.

Blackwell: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME ABOUT HOW YOU....

Blackwell: Well, what the people told us, when we left the convention that we had in Jackson, Mississippi, to come back with, all of the seats or half, and we went home, we came back with, with our dignity because we did not take the compromise and then we went out from there organizing and getting ready for the challenge of the seating of the congressmen and that was coming up in January. And in 1965, and so that's what we did, we come to organize around that. And so we went to challenge the seating of Jamie Whitten and the rest of 'em from the second congressional district. Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer, she went back and she was part of the challenge to unseat the congressmen. Annie Devine, Victoria Gray, those was the three. As a matter of fact, that was the first three black women that anybody ever known from the state of Mississippi to ever put their foot on, you know, in Congress, because they just went down there, they walked down, they was invited as guests and—

INTERVIEWER: OK, I'M NOT GOING TO GO THAT FAR IN MY—

Blackwell: Ok.

00:35:33:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT WHAT I DO WANT TO FIND OUT IS—WHEN YOU WERE, WHEN, WHEN, WHEN THE COMP—COMPROMISE WAS OFFERED AND YOU WERE NOT SEATED AND YOU DID NOT GET THE [INAUDIBLE], DID YOU FEEL THAT YOU WERE BEING REJECTED BY THE PARTY, YOU HAD PRESENTED YOUR CASE? DID YOU FEEL LIKE THEY HAD TURNED YOU DOWN, KIND OF SLAPPED YOU IN THE FACE AND REJECTED YOU?

Blackwell: Talking about the, the Democratic Party?

INTERVIEWER: THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY.

Blackwell: Of course. We felt that the Democratic Party did not give us, they offered us two seats at large. We thought it was for them, a compromise, that's what they said. But that wasn't what we wanted. And we had learned in the movement, to continue and that's what we did, we continued. And we was ready, getting read for the 1968, we left for 1964 getting ready to organize for 1968.

INTERVIEWER: LET'S CUT.

[cut]

00:36:35:00

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: MARK IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: MARKER.

[picture resumes]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: SECOND MARKER.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: SECOND MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT, WHAT, WHAT DID YOU FEEL WHEN YOU WERE OFFERED A COMPROMISE, WHAT DID THE COMPROMISE SAY TO YOU?

Blackwell: It didn't say anything.

INTERVIEWER: OK, TELL ME WHAT IT IS.

Blackwell: The compromise did not say anything to me. One of the, the reasons I suppose, that it didn't say anything to me in terms of the two seats at large we just had got involved in, in politics and, and that whole thing and to have a compromise, it, it wasn't meaning anything for what we was after and that was a better life and it wasn't saying that to us, that we had not won anything—two seats at large could be anywhere. It could be at large in Hawaii or anyplace and that's what it said to us, and so it didn't mean nothing, not to me personally and when Ms. Hamer said that to me, asked me what did I think, I said, it's your decision to make, but it don't mean nothing. We, we stick to what we said when we left Mississippi. And that's what I stuck with.

00:37:51:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, EARLIER YOU WERE TALKING ABOUT, ABOUT THE THREAT OF VIOLENCE, THE DANGER IN MISSISSIPPI. HOW DID A STRATEGY OF NONVIOLENCE WORK WITHIN, WITH THOSE KINDS OF REALITIES OF DANGER, PHYSICAL DANGERS IN A PLACE LIKE MISSISSIPPI? TALKING ABOUT NONVIOLENCE NOT APPLYING TO THE STRUGGLE IN MISSISSIPPI.

Blackwell: I think that one of the reason why we use nonviolent, SCLC was one of the

groups that was doing workshops and things on nonviolent. And SNCC took it up, but we had some, several things going on Mississippi, we had the Deacons which was not nonviolent. We had groups here that was violent and nonviolent in terms of they said violent or nonviolent, if violent is put on them, that they would not take it, and that was the Deacons. And sometime, I remember I was speaking in Natchez and the Klans, Ku Klux Klan surrounded the church, and it took the Deacons to get rid of the Ku Klux Klan that had surrounded the church, but we were in that nonviolent. So, but we believed that this was a way because violent on violence, and we didn't have anything like guns or nothing, that would ever be able to overcome the police forces of this state. And so we took on that, you know, way of life of saying we were nonviolent so we never carried any weapons because weapons was a way for them to do worse than they did do.

00:39:25:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, AND I'M GOING TO ASK YOU ONE MORE TIME. YOU'VE GOT ALL THIS THAT PEOPLE GO THROUGH: THE VIOLENCE, THE STRUGGLES, WHY, WHY DO THEY STAY IN MISSISSIPPI?

Blackwell: We stay in Mississippi, the ones who have stayed, some people are leaving, some has left, but we stay in Mississippi because it's home. And we love it. And I guess that's the way most people would feel about their state or their community. But we put a lot in it, *people like myself was born on this river. I love the land. It's the Delta. And to me, it's, it's now a challenge, it's history, it's everything of what black people is all about. We came up out of slavery, and this is where we acted it out, I suppose, all of the work, all of the hard work, and all that. But we put in our blood, sweat, and tears, and we love the land. This is Mississippi.*

INTERVIEWER: LET'S CUT.

[cut]

00:40:44:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #1: MARK IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER #2: MARKER.

Blackwell: *The, the whole issue around the compromise for us, and for me, was that it was some kind of political ploy, that they understood, but for us, for Mississippi, it was what was right and what was wrong. It was, we had been done wrong. Our rights had been taken away and you just couldn't issue some two seats at large to correct that. And it was a moral situation that, that had to be righted, so, so it wasn't just a political something to, to get away with is, that we sit in the rooms and negotiate. You know, they knew about those kind of things, but we didn't. How to sit in the rooms and negotiate away and say, you*

know, we'll take the best of this, a piece of that. We went after what was right, and it was wrong the way we had been treated for hundreds and hundreds of years, denied the right to register to vote, denied the right to participate in the political process, and that's what was going on. And to us, two seats at large, didn't mean nothing. But to them, that was—they said, well, we were just a bunch of people who was ignorant, you know, cotton choppers and didn't know nothing and that kind of, type thing. But we had our rights. But them who sits in the room and negotiates and do all that kind of stuff, to them, I guess they thought it was something, but it didn't mean nothing to us.

00:42:15:00

INTERVIEWER: DID IT MAKE YOU ANGRY THAT—

Blackwell: It makes you angry because the people who came to see us was high heads of organizations, and they was willing to compromise. And it took a person like Fannie Lou Hamer that come from Ruleville, Mississippi to say, this is an issue of right and wrong, and we will not take the compromise.

INTERVIEWER: OK, GOOD, THANK YOU.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:42:53:00

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