Interview with **David Dawley**
Date: July 6, 1989
Interviewer: Dale Rosen
Camera Rolls: 1128-1129
Sound Rolls: 159
Team: A

Interview gathered as part of ***Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s***. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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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 II*.

[camera roll #1128]
[sound roll #159]

00:00:16:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:00:19:00

Interviewer:

Tell me why you—

00:00:21:00

Camera crew member #1:

Just a second.

[cut]

00:00:25:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:00:29:00

Interviewer:

Tell me why you decided to go to the march. I mean, here you were this White guy up in Michigan. What did you think you could do down there?

00:00:37:00

David Dawley:

When Meredith was shot I was at the University of Michigan studying community organization, having been a Peace Corps volunteer in Honduras. When Meredith was shot many of us felt that, that we should go to help change the country, really. We felt we should be there. We felt that continuing the march was important. And this is a terrible answer. [laughs] OK.[unintelligible]. Sure.

[beep]

00:01:11:00

Interviewer:

You were goin' fine, you really—

[cut]

[wild sound]

00:01:12:00

Interviewer:

Fine, fine.

David Dawley:

And you can cut later.

Interviewer:

No, fine.

David Dawley:

OK.

00:01:15:00

Interviewer:

Yeah.

[cut]

00:01:18:00

Camera crew member #1:

This is take three. Mark it.

[slate]

00:01:21:00

Interviewer:

Tell me how you came to be in the march and why you went and what you thought you could accomplish.

00:01:27:00

David Dawley:

When Meredith was shot I was at Michigan in the School of Social Work studying community organization. We were activists. I had been in the Peace Corps for two years. I'd grown up an Eagle Scout in a small New England town, a tenth-generation Yankee. I was taught to stand up for what I believe, to do right. When I was growing up, every morning we said the *Pledge of Allegiance* in school. I believed that we lived in a nation with liberty and justice for all. In United States, I learned the values of democracy. When I went to Honduras, I learned the practice of democracy by working with campesinos. In Honduras, I began to see my own country as people asked me about the United States. They asked why Blacks and Whites had to use separate bathrooms, why there were signs that said, Mexicans and dogs keep out. These were new questions for me. I'd grow, grown up in all-White environment. I went to Dartmouth where I met my, where I met classmates. When I went to Dartmouth there were, there were two negro classmates. I'm uncomfortable using negro when today we say

Black, but before 1966 Blacks were negro and that was better than colored or something else. At any rate, there were two negroes at Dartmouth, and then I went into the Peace Corps, so I hadn't had any experience really with urban American, with the South or with Black America or with Black-White relations. I—our class was a transition from the Eisenhower years to the Kennedy years, from the '50s to the '60s, from sort of a, a comfortable, passive citizenship to activism. Mississippi Summer started in the year that I went into training for Peace Corps. I began to learn about civil rights and Vietnam through *Time Magazine*, a free subscription, and *Voice of America*, both filtering propaganda to us with Henry Luce's *Time Magazine* and the *Voice of America* run by the government. So, we learned about events from one particular perspective and it was very troubling because a couple things we were picking up in Honduras were that people were bothered about the way we treated Blacks, the way we treated Mexicans, the way we treated anybody different. That was not in my personal experience. When I came back to the United States, I came back with new awareness and I began seeing what was around me in a different way.

00:04:25:00

Interviewer:

Stop down for me.

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

[cut]

[wild sound]

David Dawley:

No, no pressure, but hurry up. OK. [laughs]

Interviewer:

Right. [laughs] No, but try to focus.

Camera crew member #1:

OK. Just to make sure I, I'm clear so I can focus.

00:04:36:00

Interviewer:

Yeah.

[cut]

00:04:37:00

Camera crew member #2:

Do you wanna wipe your forehead [unintelligible]. I'm sorry.

[wild sound]

Camera crew member #1:

There we go.

David Dawley:

K. [unintelligible]

Camera crew member #2:

They do this with Johnny Carson, too.

Camera crew member #1:

Yeah.

David Dawley:

Nixon [unintelligible].

Camera crew member #1:

Nixon. [laughs]

Camera crew member #2:

Right.

Interviewer:

OK.

Camera crew member #1:

Rolling JT?

Camera crew member #2:

Mm-hmm. This is take four.

00:05:07:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:05:11:00

Interviewer:

Tell me when you learned that Meredith was shot and your decision to go and how you organized other people to go.

00:05:18:00

David Dawley:

I was in school at Michigan with people who cared that there was racism in the country and we wanted to make a difference. We felt there should be social change in the country. When Meredith was killed, I don't remember where I was, but I remember images from television of the march and in a sense those images were a call for us to stand up with Meredith and with others who would join the march for changes that we felt were necessary in the country. At that time, I was chairman of Action for Human Rights, a group that we'd started at Michigan to become involved with racial discrimination around Ann Arbor and Detroit. We decided to organize students to join the march. After a newspaper report listed my name and telephone number as an organizer of the march, I got a call about two o'clock in the morning, saying that I would pay dearly if the march continued. Since we knew there was Ku Klux Klan around Detroit, we took that seriously, so my roommate and I immediately turned off the lights, crawled along, along the floor, called the police wondering what to do. Our, our, our fear turned, turned to anger very quickly, and, of course, we continued making plans to go with the march. We weren't going to be turned off the march by someone calling to threaten us. In fact, we identified to some extent with Meredith who had been threatened before he went on a march.

00:06:52:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about the instructions you got from CORE and about how to travel to the South.

00:06:59:00

David Dawley:

I had been out of the country in the Peace Corps in Honduras during the, the, some of the active years, '63 to '65, in civil rights, so most of us were new to civil rights activism and we needed some, some, some information, we needed some help before going. Some members of CORE came one evening to train us in what to expect and what to do. They told us for the drive to turn off the interior lights of the car so we wouldn't be a target. Try not to light cigarettes, again, to show light on yourself. Being aware that we had northern license plates. Carrying a checkbook with a five-dollar balance so we wouldn't be arrested for vagrancy. Not stopping in Kentucky to, to eat. Basically, drive straight through, don't create a problem, get to the march.

00:07:56:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me about the fear that bein'—

Camera crew member #2:

Excuse me. Could you not clap your hand?

Interviewer:

OK. Can you tell us about the fear that you started feeling?

00:08:07

David Dawley:

We felt fear for two reasons. We felt, was a fear of the threat from the telephone. With the training, ***there was a new sense of anxiety that we were becoming involved in something that might have consequences, something, something real. It wasn't an academic exercise,*** and that we had to take that seriously. So there was a sense of anxiety as we, as we went toward the march. We began feeling the fear of, of the Black people in Mississippi, of the negros in Mississippi. That fear bothered us. We didn't think there should be an atmosphere of fear in the United States. We didn't think that anyone in the United States in 1966 should drive down a state highway and worry about getting shot.

00:08:58:00

Interviewer:

Can you describe what you saw when you arrived on the march and what the atmosphere was like? That sort of thing.

00:09:05:00

David Dawley:

What I remember as the general beginning, as, as an image was somehow connecting with the march and then walking down the road in a long line of people. Singing. A new place, a different experience. Again, going through the door of the South and having an experience with the negros of the South. Singing "We Shall Overcome" and "Let the Sun Shine In" and different things. I remember stopping for lunch and seeing a postcard-perfect line of people going off the road into a church. Seeing Dr. Martin Luther King on the back of a pickup and not wanting to bother him, not wanting to intrude on his privacy. There was a feeling that we were wanted, that we were welcome. There was a sense of unity. There were no T-shirts, but people wore straw hats with headbands that said FREEDOM. There was no sense of danger when we first joined the march.

00:10:14:00

Interviewer:

Now, can you describe what happened when you went to Greenwood and when you were on the por—describe for me the scene with Willie Ricks on the porch at Greenwood.

00:10:24:00

David Dawley:

Before we got to Greenwood there was a sense of unity, a co, a sense of common purpose, feeling that we were walking together in history hand in hand, Black and White. Then one afternoon in Greenwood, I was in a crowd that was listening to speakers from a porch. Willie Ricks from SNCC was introduced, and Willie Ricks was angry and he was lashing out at Whites like a cracking whip. And as he talked, there was a chill, there was a feeling of a rising storm and the people were engaged in a battle like a Miller Light ad between tastes great and less filling. You know, as Willie Ricks asked people what they wanted and they answered, Freedom Now, Willie Ricks exhorted the crowd to demand not freedom now but Black Power. He kept talking at the crowd and when he asked what they wanted, they answered, Freedom Now, but more answered, Black Power until eventually Black Power began to dominate***, until finally everyone together was thundering Black Power! Black Power! And that was chilling, that was frightening.*** Sensed a moment of change. Suddenly the, the happy feeling of the march was threatened. There was a new bus and the Whites were in the back of the bus. There was a feeling of division. As he talked—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:11:56:00

David Dawley:

—as he talked, I felt something was happening. I didn't know what.

Interviewer:

OK. We had rollout in the film.

David Dawley:

OK.

[beep]

Interviewer:

So, we're gonna change.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #1129]

00:12:07:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:12:10:00

Interviewer:

Describe for me that scene, that porch in Greenwood and what happened there.

00:12:17:00

David Dawley:

In Greenwood, one afternoon while I was standing in the crowd a young man from SNCC was introduced, Willie Ricks. Willie Ricks talked to the crowd, then asked 'em what they wanted. They answered, Freedom Now, which everyone had answered. Willie Ricks told 'em to demand Black Power. And as Willie Ricks went back and forth with the crowd, talking to them, asking them time and time again what did they want, Freedom Now, and demanding Black Power, Black Power began to dominate until finally, when he asked what people want, they answered, Black Power! Black Power! in sort of a thundering crescendo of anger, of hate. An answer that seemed to separate us, Black and White. Suddenly I felt threatened. Similar to before the march when we came. It seemed like a division between Black and White. Seemed like a, a hit on well-intentioned northern Whites like me. That the message from Willie Ricks was, Go home. Go home, White boy. We don't need you.

00:13:26:00

Interviewer:

Can you talk about some of the discussions that were in the tents at night after that? Or, or not necessarily in the tents; between people after that. Between Whites or between Blacks and Whites.

00:13:40:00

David Dawley:

I have images of general discussions around the tents after listening to Willie Ricks, and the atmosphere was clearly different around the march after Black Power became a demand from that porch in Greenwood. There was a surface of more anger and more hostility. There was a release of more hostility toward Whites. Suddenly I was a honky, not David. When there were small groups of two or three younger Black men who might be talking to each other, where a couple days earlier we might stand around and listen, now they told us to Move out of the way, honky. Others wanted to comfort us, wanted to, us to know that there was no danger and that we were welcome, but clearly now there was a division.

00:14:32:00

Interviewer:

Can we stop down?

Camera crew member #1:

Sure.

[beep]

[cut]

00:14:39:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:14:41:00

Interviewer:

What did you think of Willie Ricks?

00:14:43:00

David Dawley:

I thought Willie Ricks was angry. I resented his anger. That, for me, an emotional baptism to Blackness. [laughs] I had to experience emotions through Willie Ricks, where before, perhaps the experience had been more clinical of going to the march and participating, that was safe and that was comfortable. Willie Ricks made the march uncomfortable. You, you know. He made the, the feelings between Blacks and Whites uncomfortable.

00:15:15:00

Interviewer:

Why did you, when did you leave the march and why?

David Dawley:

We left the march a couple days later becau—

Camera crew member #1:

[unintelligible]

Interviewer:

Sure. When did you leave?

00:15:24:00

David Dawley:

Mm-hmm. We left the march a couple days later. Basically, we had come for a few days, we had to return to finals. We were not unhappy to leave the march. When we came, we had felt wanted, we had felt needed. When we left, we didn't feel wanted. So we went back to Michigan to, to fight another war.

00:15:45:00

Interviewer:

Did you have any sense of being, when we talked on the phone you said something about being, also that there was a fear and it was part of the reason why you left. Can you talk to that?

00:15:58:00

David Dawley:

We didn't leave because of fear. We were not run out of town. And what really Willie Ricks needs to know today is that he didn't run me out of anywhere. I went back to Chicago a year later and was the only White working on the West Side streets of Chicago, all Black, so. But we did leave Mississippi with a sense of, of discomfort and, and uncertainty about what was going to happen between Blacks and Whites. You know, we, we had made plans to leave the march, but we were not unhappy to go back to, to go back home where we belonged.

00:16:42:00

Interviewer:

How did, do you feel about, though, the, the pressure, I guess, around this Blacks only when here you had a death threat coming down from the Whites? Here where you're told to go home by the Blacks.

00:16:56:00

David Dawley:

There was a message from Willie Ricks of Go home. That wasn't the message from all Blacks. You know, that was counterbalanced. I had lived in the Peace Corps, I had lived in another culture, I had been surrounded by something different. I had been surrounded by people who didn't like Americans, so I wasn't necessarily moved by that threat. It affected me emotionally, but I wasn't gonna get run off by that threat. We were still involved in change, just required different thinking and an adjustment and, and some new strategies.

00:17:23:00

Interviewer:

How were you affected emotionally? You said, I was affected emotionally.

00:17:27:00

David Dawley:

Well, the immediate emotional reaction was, was a certain, a certain fear [pause] I'm tryin' to struggle with what that feeling is. Off balance, you know. Somebody'd given us a good shoulder block and we just felt off balance. We needed to get back on our feet. Not quite understanding what was happening, but knowing that something was going on.

00:18:01:00

Interviewer:

OK. We can stop. Good.

00:18:02:00

Camera crew member #2:

OK [inaudible]. OK.

[beep]

[cut]

[wild sound]

00:18:07:00

Interviewer:

How did that moment change your feelings about being involved in the civil rights movement?

Camera crew member #1:

Yeah.

David Dawley:

Yeah.

Camera crew member #1:

I mean—

Interviewer:

That's the question.

David Dawley:

I, I, I can—

Interviewer:

OK.

David Dawley:

—answer you. I don't know if I can answer you within the film that you've got, but that's not— [laughs]

Interviewer:

All right. No, that's our problem.

Camera crew member #2:

That's our problem.

Interviewer:

That's our problem.

David Dawley:

Yeah. I've got, I got time, but you don't have film.

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

[cut]

00:18:27:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:18:29:00

Interviewer:

How did that moment in Greenwood or the march itself change how you felt about being part of the civil rights movement?

00:18:40:00

David Dawley:

I think the, the immediate impact was on two levels. There was the emotional and then there was the, the intellectual, you know, what did we do with the experience. Emotionally, certainly there was created a, a distance. We didn't know what we should do. But again, we were activists, we were interested in changing the United States, so we listened to what SNCC was saying and there was a sense that this was a time when Blacks had the right to define the movement and that Blacks would lead the strategy. ***And the strategy coming out of Black Power from SNCC was that Blacks should organize with Blacks and Whites should organize with Whites.*** I accepted that strategy, my friends accepted that strategy, ***so we moved on to work with Whites on issues that we felt we should work with. In the next year, that was not civil rights, that was Vietnam.*** After that, I ended up as an organizer in a Black community believing that I should organize with Whites, against the peak of Black Power, accepting that Blacks had the right to work with Blacks, but I met up with people in Chicago, and we felt, despite that, there were things that we could do together that weren't gonna happen, that needed to get done, change that needed to occur, so that's what we did.

00:20:08:00

Interviewer:

Did you have any sense of, here I am, I'm this White person, I came down South to help you all and then you tell me to go home and you tell me to work among my—did you have any personal sense of feeling gypped or being, you know, dismissed?

00:20:23:00

David Dawley:

No, I felt more cheated before we went on the march. I felt cheated by the press which hadn't made me aware of the fear among negros in Mississippi. You know, the, the fear of registering to vote, something basic in the United States, and that was more dominant for me than getting driven away from a march. I can't say that immediately coming back from the march we understood what we should do, what the opportunities were going to be. So, our heads reacted to different issues, and the primary issue that came up for us in 1966 and 1967 was Vietnam more than civil rights.

00:21:13:00

Interviewer:

K.

Camera crew member #1:

All right.

Interviewer:

Let’s shut down. That was actually, that was helpful.

[beep]

Camera crew member #1:

That was very good.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:21:18:00