

Interview with **Juanita Abernathy**

Date: October 26, 1988

Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer

Camera Rolls: 4041

Sound Rolls: 416

Team: D

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.

Preferred Citation

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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 #4041]

[sound roll #416]

00:00:14:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:00:20:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mrs. Abernathy, let's begin with your giving me a sense of what you think the role of women in SCLC in the movement was.

00:00:29:00

Juanita Abernathy:

Mmm, we were the movement. [laughs] I guess that's a, an easy way to put it, but, but, technically, yes. The men sort of ran things, but the women were actually the bodies. We were the foot soldiers, we were the protesters, the demonstrators. Women and children, and,

and te—and teenagers, I won't say children. There were some little ones, too. But we had a tremendous role, because whenever there was a demonstration, when there was a sit-in, women sat in, and, and young people, college students and, and women. The men ran the movement but we were the actual bodies that made it happen.

00:01:28:00

Interviewer:

Now, let's move on to something that we discussed before. Not many people understand that Dr. King was anything but a saint. You talked about his having a sense of humor.

Juanita Abernathy:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Could you give us, give us some feeling about his sense of humor?

00:01:45:00

Juanita Abernathy:

Oh, he'd tease you to death! I can't think of any one specific instance...but he would, for instance, if we came out of a red-hot situation where we almost didn't make it, he would laugh about, Oh, you know, I thought that man was gonna kill me, and, you know, you, you, you were kinda scared too, you were shaking, and [unintelligible] I thought maybe I had to kind of get you together! This kind of thing. And just...we would end up laughing about something that was really horrible, but he saw the humor in it. And it was these kind of things that kept the pressure and tension down and you didn't really, you know, see it as such a horrible experience. After it was over you could laugh at yourself. And Dr. King was always that person who could make you laugh. Very, very humorous. A lot of folk didn't know that about him because most people saw him as that serious orator who was always an orator and very stiff, but he was not like that. At all.

00:02:57:00

Interviewer:

Now, you told me a, you told me about a joke that he had about Bull Connor and your ice cream. Could you tell us that?

00:03:02:00

Juanita Abernathy:

Oh! [laughs]. Ooh, well, they...he would say always—I make ice, home-made ice cream, and I'm good! And he would say that if Bull Connor and those could eat my ice cream, we'd serve, we'd solve the race problem, because one or two servings would [laughs] get them on our side, and if they could eat my ice cream there would be no more race problem.

00:03:32:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's cut for a minute.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Rolling and speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:03:38:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Thank you. OK, Jackie.

00:03:41:00

Interviewer:

OK, just for my own piece of mind, Mrs. Abernathy, let me just ask you simply, did Dr. King have a sense of humor?

00:03:50:00

Juanita Abernathy:

Of course. Tremendous sense of humor and was always laughing, always. He, he'd tease you to death and you couldn't get angry about the tease. He...you would, you know, you'd laugh and he would make you laugh about whatever it was that he was teasing you about. Whether you liked being teased or not, you'd end up laughing about it. It was that kind of, he's that kind of personality that even if you wanted to be stiff and depressed or cold around him, it

wouldn't last. So, that's something that most people didn't know about him. Because he looked very formal, you know, and reserved, [laughs] but that's not, that was not always his personality. He had a warm, pass—compassionate, friendly, giving, caring, down-to-earth side of him.

00:04:52:00

Interviewer:

Let's, let's continue on that down-to-earth side.

Juanita Abernathy:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

You, you said that he liked to come over to your house to eat?

Juanita Abernathy:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Could, could you tell us about that?

00:05:01:00

Juanita Abernathy:

Well, I always had a lot of food. I guess, my upbringing, I always cooked enough for three or four extra people in the event somebody was coming by. And he would always come, and first thing he'd do was go to the kitchen, look on the stove, take the lid up off the pot. And I would always say, You haven't washed your hands! Wash your hands [laughs] before you lift the lid off of my pot! He'd go straight, take the lid up, look at what was in there and if it was anything he wanted to taste, get a fork and taste it! And he'd go to the refrigerator, just, just be at home. He felt very comfortable coming here and very comfortable when he got here.

00:05:45:00

Interviewer:

Now, could—

Juanita Abernathy:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—you tell me again about the last night that Dr. King had dinner at your house here in Atlanta? It was after the Memphis March—

Juanita Abernathy:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

—and if you could make reference to the fact that it was after the Memphis March, I'd appreciate it.

00:05:59:00

Juanita Abernathy:

OK, the, the, the, the March had, they'd had the violence at the March in Memphis, and he and Ralph had decided that they were gonna take us out to dinner. So, instead of going out to dinner, Martin called and asked me that afternoon, if he brought the fish would I cook it, so I told him yes, I'd cook it, but he didn't have to bring fish to my house. He said, Oh, no, I'll bring the fish. He went and got the fish, and it was croaker, we liked [laughs] croaker fish. And he and Coretta came over and I cooked that fried fish all night, it seems. But really, I fried fish, and fried fish, and more fish, and more fish. And we ate the fish. But he wanted to come here because if you go to a restaurant, then you gotta answer questions about, Well, what happened to the March? Why the violence? And, and he was not in the kind of mood to, you know, to deal with answering those questions because Dr. King was very sensitive about anything that was in opposition to what his philosophy was. And he didn't want anybody identifying him with the violence that had taken place 'cause, you know, some of it was done by us, by Blacks, and that hurt. And he just sort of felt that, you know, part of his reputation had been damaged and tarnished a bit, so he didn't wanna have to deal with answering questions on that, and coming here he would not encounter that. So, we sat that night, and talked about light things, and talked about me, and talked about Ralph. We talked about each other, talked about the movement, talked about folk in it, [laughs] and just, just, just chitter chat, but nothing serious. ***And we did not talk about Memphis. The news came on, and whenever there was a flash on TV about it, he got very quiet, and he was really, really, sort of depressed. And I think he was more depressed that night, I believe, than I'd ever seen him, because the violence really got to him*** that, that took place in Memphis. That really got to him. And, and we stayed away from it as much as possible, but naturally, the minute a news flash came on, his ears sharpened and he forgot we were even in the room then. But then we would, again, take him away from that kind of thinking as much as possible, until we all fell asleep. [laughs] And everybody balled up on the sofa, there were two love seats here,

he was on one love seat and Ralph was on the other, Coretta was on the sofa in the living room, and we all just fell asleep in different parts of the house, and we literally slept here all night. But he was really, really depressed over the violence that had taken place in Memphis. And I guess, weighing heavy on him, now that I look back, was probably the fact that, possibly, he was nearing his end, because I sincerely believe he knew it. Because, I think, if you live close enough to God, I don't think it slips up on you. You may not know exactly when, but there's an inner feeling that lets you know you're near and I think he knew it.

00:09:58:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut. How much more—

[cut]

00:10:02:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hit it.

[slate]

00:10:09:00

Interviewer:

OK, so SCLC after Dr. King's assassination.

00:10:14:00

Juanita Abernathy:

After the assassination, I think we were more or less in shock. We...and mourning. We knew that the inevitable probably would come one day, but we weren't ready for it and certainly not at this period. Not at the period where we had the most powerful forces coming together in history, which was the Mexican Americans, the Indians, Blacks and Whites, going to Washington to say, Here I am! You don't know, you can't say I don't exist! so...And I've come to tell you what I want from America. And certainly, we didn't anticipate his death at that time, because this was going to change history and bring America where she should be. But in actuality, that's why he's dead, that's why they killed him. Because of that—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Juanita Abernathy:

—powerful force coming together. So, America was mourning, all of us.

00:11:22:00

Interviewer:

Great! We got it!

Juanita Abernathy:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, end of camera roll forty, forty-one.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:11:31:00

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