

Interview with **Deborah Johnson**

Date: October 19, 1988

Interviewer: Terry Rockefeller

Camera Rolls: 3026-3030

Sound Rolls: 313-314

Team: C

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

Interview with Deborah Johnson, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 19, 1988 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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 #3026]

[sound roll #313]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[clears throat] OK.

00:00:18:00

Interviewer:

I want to know how you first found out about the Black Panther Party and, and thought about joining it [inaudible] Fred.

00:00:26:00

Deborah Johnson:

I first found out about the Black Panther Party, my brother brought a flyer home with a Black panther on it was, like, it seems like it was walkin' across the page. And it said, "The Black Panthers are here." And I had heard about the Black Panther Party. They were doing some things at Chicago State University and organize, tryin' to organize free breakfast programs in the community and I was really impressed with...I thought it was good that Black people were standing up and demanding our rights. The Black Panther Party with Fred Hampton and some other members came over to Wright City College and I heard them speak. Prior to that, I had seen Fred Hampton, Bobby Rush, Iris, and I think her husband, on Ronnie Barrett's _Chicago Show_. And from that, I was just really impressed with Fred, he had a really good knowledge of history. He seemed to really be sincere, believin' in what he was doin' and their ideas at the time were in agreement with what I believed in and, and thought in terms of Black people's struggle.

00:01:43:00

Interviewer:

Now how did you first actually meet Fred?

00:01:45:00

Deborah Johnson:

When he came over, when Fred came over to Wright City College, it was the first time that I actually met him. I knew from seeing him on TV that I would meet him, though. I knew, too, that I would have a baby, [laughs] his baby. He came, Fred Hampton came over to Wright City College to speak to a group of students. I think it was sponsored by the Afro American Student Union, or Black Student Union, I forgot what it was called at that time. And they came over and I tried to get some friends to go and listen to them because I didn't want to go by myself, but some of them didn't want to go. So, I went in and I sat down in the front and I heard them spe—I heard Fred speak. Afterwards, I introduced myself to him.

00:02:32:00

Interviewer:

Now, when you, when you saw him on television, what do you remember about seeing him on television? What show was he on?

00:02:37:00

Deborah Johnson:

Ronnie—Fred Hampton and Bobby Rush and Iris Chan, they were on Ronnie Barrett's _Chicago Show_, and what really impressed me, in addition to the conversation they were having, talking about the party's program, how the Black Panther Party got started, Ronnie Barrett seemed to be trying to cut to Fred off and lead him in a certain direction with the conversation. And Fred just took over and he was determined that he was going to get his

point across in terms of the programs that the party was involved in and, Ronnie Barrett said, Well, we'll break and we'll be back with somebody else. They broke, and of course, Fred wasn't through talking, so there Fred was after the break, still talking about the Black Panther Party and I said, Wow, these are some bad brothers and sisters and I want to be a part of that.

00:03:26:00

Interviewer:

What kind of leader was Fred? You, you saw him do all sorts of things. How did he lead people? How did he get them to join the party?

00:03:33:00

Deborah Johnson:

Fred was very dynamic, charismatic. I think the success of his leadership, not only in being charismatic but being a very personable person, Fred believed in what he was doing and the sincerity came across. He would never tell anybody, Well, listen, brother, you can sell these papers, or, Listen, sister, you can sell 200 papers. Fred would get out there, although he was the leader of the party in the state of Illinois, he would get out there and in the middle of the street, Hey, sister, you wanna buy a Black Panther newspaper? This is a people's party. And he would just engage people in conversation and, and just to see that, to be a part of that, would, like, send chills, but it was a really good feeling.

00:04:21:00

Interviewer:

What were, what were some of the programs that you were personally involved with and how did it make you feel to be part of those programs? What, what were you able to accomplish during the time you were in the party?

00:04:35:00

Deborah Johnson:

Some of the things that I was involved in, the programs that the Black Panther Party had were they had a free breakfast program and we would go to various community centers, churches, and ask people if we could have this program for kids, to feed kids before they went to school. [clears throat] We would solicit donations from various companies, various stores, and we would feed the kids. The beautiful thing about that program was that nobody had to fill out a form, nobody had to let us know what their father was at home, did their mother work, what their income was, or what they ate last night for dinner. You know? The program was just there to serve the community and that was the beauty, beauty of it. People basically, I think, shy away from programs when you gotta go through all that bureaucracy

and we didn't involve people in that. Also we had a free—Spurgeon Jake Winters Free Medical Center that was on the West Side. I was involved in door-to-door canvassing, having people fill out questionnaires, soliciting doctors to volunteer time, and donations; monetary or medical supplies, whatever anybody could give, volunteers to work at the medical center. And whatever people were willing to give, it was acceptable to us. You did not have to be a Black Panther to give something to the community. And everybody had a talent or something that they can give back. Free—we, the Black Panther Party also had a free prison busing program in that families of people that were incarcerated in prisons and jails throughout Illinois, and some Michigan prisons also, would be allowed, we would take a bus trip to these prisons and jail two or three times a week. And if there was a charge, if people could afford it, it would be minimal in terms of—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Deborah Johnson:

—the gas or whatever. But we thought it was very important that while these brothers were incarcerated they—

00:06:39:00

Interviewer:

We, we're just running out of film. And you are doing really well.

Deborah Johnson:

[laughs]

Interviewer:

[laughs] We, we start—

[beep]

Deborah Johnson:

Does that mean—

[cut]

[camera roll #3027]

00:06:47:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark. OK.

[slate]

00:06:50:00

Interviewer:

OK. Yeah. You were telling me about Fred giving speeches once and you told me about a speech he gave about "Someday We'll Be Together." Can you describe that?

00:07:10:00

Deborah Johnson:

An-another beautiful thing about Fred Hampton was he was such a great speaker and he really moved you to want to participate. And you could come to a rally and say, Well, I don't know about these Black Panthers. I've read that they have guns, I've read that they shoot people, I've read that they want to kill so many people a week. But you go to a rally and you hear Fred Hampton talking about the programs, you just be so, you get so excited about it. I remember we were at the People's Church on Ashland and there was a record by Diana Ross and the Supremes, "Someday We'll Be Together," and that was playing in the background. And Fred Hampton was doing a speech, Chairman Fred was doing the speech, talking about naming the people in the party that had been murdered and killed, who had died, in the people's liberation struggle. He went on naming these people, then the contributions they made to the community, and saying, Someday we'll be together in a revolutionary happy hunting ground. It was just so beautiful and people were just, you can see the fire in people's eyes, they were just really excited and they wanted to be a part of this, and they were like, Well, I got a job but whatever I can do for my, well, really, to help myself, I'm a Black person, I need to help myself and my community. And everybody, all ethnic groups were there. Rich, poor, of course there were police there too, you know, listening to what Fred Hampton had to say. But people from poor White communities, they were just fired up too, and, you know, Fred would direct them. He talked to people after the rallies, to direct them to, Well, you can work with the Young Patriots, or in Uptown area, or, You can work with the Young Lords through the Hispanic group or you could work with whatever. But we need everybody to par-participate because this is the people's liberation struggle.

00:09:04:00

Interviewer:

How did, how did the speech that Fred did, gave with, with that music go? What, what, what were some of the things he said about—who, who, who was gonna be together? How, how did he mix that with, how'd it go?

00:09:16:00

Deborah Johnson:

I don't remember how Fred's speech went word for word but when he was, used the Diana Ross and the Supremes, "Someday We'll Be Together," but he did say—Huey was in jail at the time and he said, Someday we'll be together with our Minister of Defense, Huey P. Newton, who put a stop sign on the corner because young brothers and sisters were getting killed at that corner. Someday we'll be together with Apprentice 'Bunchy' Carter who was killed in the people's liberation struggle fighting for the people, living for the people, and he died for the people. And he went on to name, Someday we'll be together with Nate, Nate Junior, you know. And he just went on and named people and, and it was just really, it was beautiful, it was beautiful. And, and you got the sense that these brothers and sisters that had went on before, whether they were incarcerated or had been murdered, somehow their spirit was still with us, encouraging us on, you know, to give us strength to go on and continue fighting, because we were on the right path.

00:10:26:00

Interviewer:

How, how did the party, how did the party members in Chicago cope when it seemed like the police were coming down by sending Fred to prison? I mean, what happened?

00:10:36:00

Deborah Johnson:

At the time Fred went to prison, there was a lot of confusion in the party here. Although, actually, theoretically, Fred was not the leader of the Black Panther Party in terms of rank, Bobby Rush was. But Fred was, in reality the leader, because people identified with him, the way Fred presented the party's program. And as I said before, his enthusiasm for what he was doing, people just seemed to catch on to that and really get fired up. When Fred went to prison, there was a lot of dissension in the party. Some people, a lot of people didn't have faith in the leadership that was in place there. The belief in the sincerity level of some of the people that were in leadership positions was really questioned, you know. And I think that's one of the problems with our organization is that we latch on to dynamic personalities and there aren't a number of leaders to come in, in case someone is murdered, in case someone is incarcerated, and the leadership was not there at the time that Fred went to, went to prison. Fortunately, although it was a long time him being incarcerated, it wasn't years that he was incarcerated, so the party managed, once he got out of prison, managed to pull back together.

00:12:02:00

Interviewer:

You, you brought up that sense that the police were kind of there a lot. How, how did you first become aware that the, the police and, and, and...were surrounding the party in some ways and were,

00:12:17:00

Deborah Johnson:

I think everyone that was in the Black Panther Party kind of understood, it was a given that we would have wiretaps, that we would be followed, that we would be harassed, we'd be locked up, that we would even be beaten by the police. We felt that in a country such as America where, that was supposedly the wealthiest country in the world, people should not be hungry. The people should have a right to decent housing, full employment, and Black people and poor minority people should not be the victims of a judicial system. We felt that this country was in a position to correct those wrongs, was not doing it, and that anybody that was on the path of liberating the community, making those things happen in the community, feeding people, clothing people, educating people to what was going on in their community and things that they had a right to, we knew that we would be harassed and we would be victims of surveillance. But that was something that we kept in the back of our heads but it wasn't like we got up everyday saying, Oh, my God, the police are going to be outside my door, because that will, like, paralyze, you can't move, because the fear will have you where you're like, Oh, well, I can't do this, I'll go to jail. We focused on what we needed to do and we did that. Of course, when you pick up the phone and you hear conversation in the back and you don't have a party line and it's one phone in your house, you hear dialing or hear like a tape machine going, then you know. You walk out, a police car, a marked police car is there, or somebody in an unmarked car that does not belong in that community at all, you know, you know that you're being watched.

00:14:06:00

Interviewer:

Did that happen to you?

Deborah Johnson:

It happened a number of times.

Interviewer:

What, what, what happened?

00:14:11:00

Deborah Johnson:

A number of times, when we would leave the Black Panther office on 2350 West Madison, police cars would follow us. The telephone in the Black Panther office, you can hear the tape machines going, you can hear the clicking, you would hang up and walk away from the phone and go back, and still hear that same clicking. The lines had not been disconnected. People would follow members of the Black Panther Party home. And not only us, some people were afraid to even come into the office that were not members of the party because they would get followed and police would come and ask them questions about, What is, this is off the record, what is your association with the Black Panther Party? Do you know this person? And they had pictures of some of us, you know, Do you know this person, what rank do they have, what do they do in the Black Panther Party? We also knew that when we had rallies that police officers would come, not, of course, wearing uniforms, but trying to blend into the crowd, but it was a uncomfortable feeling, you could tell they were out of place. You know, even they have sent Black officers to our rallies, to our meetings, and you can tell that they don't belong. Now, I'm not going to sit here and say that paranoia, we were not afraid, and it didn't mean anything. Of course it did, but we didn't let that immobilize us or stop us from what—we didn't focus, we tried not to focus on that. We knew what we had to do.

00:15:40:00

Interviewer:

You told me one story, though, about witnessing a raid on the office that you had to walk right by. Do you remember that moment?

Deborah Johnson:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Can you describe that incident?

00:15:54:00

Deborah Johnson:

One day, I remember particularly when there was a raid on the office, I was walking past the office, going to the office, as a matter of fact, and I see the policemen jumping out of the police car. And I'm really concentrating hard on not showing any emotion, that I'm not connected with this, because the fear was there that they might just start shooting, Oh, there goes a Black Panther, let's shoot her. And I remember just thinking of so-some place just totally removed from where I was and walking past there. And they're shooting, shooting up

the office and then I walked down the street and I, I come back, you know, just like I'm just casually walking down the street. And they're dragging people out and beating them and I'm fighting back the tears. I don't want to cry because I don't want them to know that I'm a part of this. Because I know I have to call somebody and let them know that these people have been arrested and what happened with this raid. So, I, I guess all that is to say you know things are going on around you, but you have to be able to take yourself out of that place and do what you gotta do. It's necessary for your own survival.

00:17:13:00

Interviewer:

I, I wanna talk about the raid on the apartment and I wanted you to tell me what you did the night before, were you up at the—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Excuse me, we have only about twenty feet left.

Interviewer:

OK, why don't we run out this film?

Deborah Johnson:

OK.

Interviewer:

It's the new roll on—

Deborah Johnson:

OK.

Interviewer:

—that way we won't get interrupted.

Deborah Johnson:

OK.

Interviewer:

All right.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #3028]

00:17:41:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:17:47:00

Interviewer:

Now, the, the night of December the 3rd, did, did you go to the politic-political education class that was being held that night? Did, did you go out of the apartment that night? What, do you remember what you did?

00:17:59:00

Deborah Johnson:

Well, on the night of December 3rd, 1969, there was a political orientation class held at the People's Church. I didn't attend the class, I was at home that night, and Fred was to come home after the class was over and we were to go out to his mother's house. Of course, the class went on and on, and then some of the people ended up going back to the office. At this time, I was still at home, waiting on Fred, and I would talk to him at different times, and he, and he kept telling me, I'll be there in a few minutes, I'll be there in a few minutes, which I know would, could go on forever. And the last time he called me, I said, Fred we have to go out to your mother's house. And he said, OK, I'm coming. Prior to that, I had went over to a friend's house. Fred was going to meet me there, pick me up at my friend's house, and we would go out to his mother's for dinner. When I talked to him the last time, he said, Well, it's so late, do you really want to go? If we spend the night out there, we can't sleep together. And I said, Oh, definitely not, we cannot go. [laughs] So, Fred had someone come and pick me up from my friend's house and bring me back. William O'Neal, who was the police informant, either dropped me at the friend's house or picked me up from there to bring me back home. I came back home and was home for a little while. Then Fred eventually came and so I played like I was mad because we didn't go to his mother's house, and he made an issue, Well, we can still, I said, No, that's OK, we'll stay here. So we went, I went back to our bedroom and Fred came back there, after talking to some people for a while that were in the apartment.

00:19:59:00

Interviewer:

Now who was at the apartment at that point?

00:20:01:00

Deborah Johnson:

At the time that I went back to the back bedroom, Harold Bell was there, Louis Truelock was there, one of, another brother was there, I think he was from Rockford, I don't, don't really remember. But other than Harold Bell from Rockford, it was another brother there. And some other people that had went to the political education class had stopped by the house or either, had either brought home Fred, Fred home. I think I remember seeing Ronald Satchel there. Fred was talking, I'm like really tired, and he says, OK, you go to the back, I'll be back to the room soon. Go back to the room and I go to sleep, lie down for a few minutes and Fred comes back. And we talk a little bit and then we call his mother to tell her that we're not coming, it's so late. And then we talked to his sister also on the phone. Fred at that time fell asleep in the middle of the conversation with his mother and I couldn't wake him up. I talked to them, told them goodbye, and hung up the phone.

00:21:20:00

Interviewer:

So, how were you woken up the next morning?

00:21:23:00

Deborah Johnson:

The first thing I remember after Fred and I had went to sleep was being awakened by somebody shaking Fred while we were laying in the bed saying, Chairman, Chairman, wake up, the pigs are vamping, the pigs are vamping! And about the same time, I looked up and I see what appeared to be flashes of lighting, light going across the front entranceway to the back bedroom. Some were going from the south, I guess, and some towards the north. But it looks, looked like a million flashes of light, because the apartment was pretty much dark. I rolled over to Fred's, I rolled over to Fred. He still hadn't moved at this point, as I recall. I rolled over and then slid down to Fred's right side. So, that put me closest to the wall in the bedroom. The bed was pushed against the wall. Fred, at some point, raised his head up, looked out towards the entranceway to the bedroom and laid his head back down. That's all the movement that Fred Hampton had that night. Someone else was in, in the room with me and kept yelling out, Stop shooting! Stop shooting! We have a pregnant sister in here. One had come out. They stopped shooting for a while then they started back shooting again. ***This***

person that was in the room with me kept shouting out, [siren] We have a pregnant sister in here! Stop shooting! Eventually, the shooting stopped and they said we could come out. I remember crossing over Fred and telling myself over and over, Be real careful, don't stumble, they'll try to shoot you. Just be real calm, watch how you walk, keep your hands up, don't reach for anything, don't even try to close your robe. I'm walking out of the bedroom, there, two lines of policemen that I have to walk through on my right and my left. I remember focusing on their badge numbers and their faces and saying them over and over in my head, so I wouldn't forget. As I walked through this, these two lines of policemen, one of them grabbed my robe and opened it and said, Well, what do you know, we have a broad here. Another policeman grabbed me by the hair and pretty much just shoved me—I had more hair then—pretty much just shoved me into the kitchen area. It was very cold that night, I guess that it snowed, and the back door was open. Some people were on the floor in the kitchen area. I think it was Harold Bell was standing next to me in the kitchen area. They—it was a police, plainclothes policeman there, and I asked him for a pin, so I could pin my robe, because it was just open and he said, Ask the other guy. And then somebody came back and handcuffed me and Harold Bell behind our back. I heard a voice come from the area, I guess from the dining room area, which was, the kitchen was off from that area. And someone said, He's barely alive, he'll barely make it. The shoot—I heard some shooting start again. Not much, just a little shooting and then someone said, He's good and dead now. I'm standing at the kitchen wall and I'm trying to remember details of these policemen's face, say it over and over in my head, and, and badge numbers, You gotta remember, you gotta remember. And then when I felt like I was just going to really just pass out, I started saying the ten-point program over and over in my head. [pause] At one point, I turned around, the shooting had continued again and I saw the police drag Verlina Brewer and throw her into the refrigerator. And it looked like blood was all over her and she fell to the floor, they picked her up and threw her in again. I saw Ronald Satchel bleeding. I kept trying to focus on the ten-point program platform, because I, again, wanted to take myself out of that place and, and I knew I just couldn't break down there, because I didn't know if I would be killed or, or what would happen.

00:26:26:00

Interviewer:

Did you actually see Fred's body?

00:26:29:00

Deborah Johnson:

No. No, I didn't see Fred's body as I left the apartment. As they took us out of the apartment towards the front, I made a point not to look in that direction. I was afraid of what I would see and I didn't know what I would do if I saw Fred there bloody or dead. So, I didn't look down, I didn't look around, I just looked straight ahead. And really concentrated on walking straight, not stumbling, really lifting my feet up, you know, so that I wouldn't fall, and they would say, Oh, she tried to escape, or something. They took us down the stairs and put us in

a paddy wagon, the police did, and they took us to, I think, Wood Street district. The policemen there, one policeman came in, and they kind of tried to play this good cop/bad cop role. One cop was real mean, another one was nice, and, Well, you can talk to me, and this sort of thing. And, a reporter came in from the Tribune. I asked him what paper he was with, he said, The Tribune. He wanted to talk to me about what had happened and I told him, There's only one thing you have to print in your story and it's fascism, and do you know how to spell it? He got really mad and stormed out of the room. They took us to, I think, 12th Street. At the time we were—they put me in a different paddy wagon. I guess they took the men in one and me in another. At the time, all this time I just had a robe and s-some house shoes on in the snow, in the cold. I was handcuffed behind my back. When they got me out of the paddy wagon, the police officer jammed a revolver into my stomach and said, You better not try to escape, and all I could think about was, Can't fall, look out for ice, you can't fall, because if you do you're dead, and I just really made myself walk straight and not stumble. 'Cause I knew, I just knew I was like, oh please, just let me make it to wherever they're taking me—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Deborah Johnson:

—don't let me fall and that, that was real important to me at that time. They took us to—

00:28:45:00

Interviewer:

We need to stop just right now for a second but you're, you're doing fine.

Deborah Johnson:

OK, OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #3029]

[sound roll #314]

00:28:49:00

Camera Crew Member:

Mark.

[slate]

00:28:54:00

Interviewer:

OK. I know it's real hard to talk about but can you describe one more time how you were woken up the morning as the raid started. What, what happened? That morning, just the very beginning, the police came in.

00:29:08:00

Deborah Johnson:

On the morning of December 4, 1969, I remember being awakened by someone coming into the back bedroom shaking Fred, saying, Chairman, Chairman, wake up, the pigs are vamping. I remember looking up and seeing flashes of light going across the entranceway to the back bedroom that we were in from, I guess, the south and the north. And it looked like just millions of flashes of light just going across the front of the entranceway to the bedroom.

00:29:42:00

Interviewer:

What did you hear?

Deborah Johnson:

I, I heard, it sounded like a machine gun then I heard individual single shots also. And then it sounded like I heard shotguns also, handguns and shotguns. But I remember hearing rapid fire like a machine gun. In—

Interviewer:

Did you try to wake Fred at that point?

00:30:07:00

Deborah Johnson:

I didn't try to wake Fred. I, I, all I could think about was covering him and he wasn't waking. I saw the person, I don't remember who that was, but I saw the person shaking Fred. His, his arms were, like, folded and he was like, like this shaking him, Chairman, Chairman, wake up, and he, he wasn't responding at all. And I, I don't, don't know what I was thinking, was like, moved over to cover him and then he still didn't move. And I s-slid over to his right side and I think at that point he lifted his head kind of, he was like this, lifted his head up and looked

up towards the door but he didn't move his body at all and then he just laid his head back down like this. At that point I don't know if Fred was shot or anything, I don't remember whether or not there was any blood on me or my clothing, I just remember him lifting his head up and looking out of the door entranceway. The other person that was—Fred at no time ever got out of the bed, or, or made any other movement other than to move his head up. The person that was in the room with us, they kept shouting out, Stop shooting, stop shooting, we have a pregnant woman, pregnant sister in here. The shooting would stop for a second and then it'd start back up. Eventually they stopped shooting and—because a person kept screaming, We're coming out with our hands up, stop shooting. And I remember crossing over Fred. At this point, I had moved over towards the wall, which the bed was pushed against the wall in the room, and I crossed over Fred but I didn't really look at him. I think I was afraid to.

00:32:00:00

Interviewer:

Now, the police took you into the kitchen or you, you went into the kitchen and while you were in the kitchen, what did you hear?

00:32:08:00

Deborah Johnson:

When I was in the kitchen, I heard a voice, an unfamiliar voice say, He's barely alive, or, He'll barely make it. Then the shooting started back again, then I heard the same unfamiliar voice say, He's good and dead now, and I, I knew in my mind they were, I assume they were talking about Fred. And I knew when I left out of there, I couldn't look towards the room and I kept trying to remember over and over in, in my head the badge numbers that I had looked at as I came out the room through the two lines of policemen that were at the entranceway and trying to remember details of facial features that I had seen in these police officers so that I wouldn't forget, you know, later on, so I could tell somebody what happened.

00:32:59:00

Interviewer:

How did you finally actually learn that Fred had been killed?

00:33:06:00

Deborah Johnson:

When they locked me up at the police station, they...I kept begging them for a call, to make one call and said, By law I'm entitled to make one call. I called, I think the office, the Black

Panther office and I spoke to Bobby Rush and he told me that Fred was dead, Fred had been killed. [sighs]

00:33:30:00

Interviewer:

Stop. That's—

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:33:40:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

[slate]

00:33:45:00

Interviewer:

Now, when, when you got out of jail, what kind of things were organized in the community to try to bring the community together and, and find some strength around this terrible tragedy? What, what things did you participate in and what other things were happening to, to Panther members at that point?

00:34:10:00

Deborah Johnson:

After we had been arrested and charged with, I think I was charged with two counts of attempted murder and aggravated assault. Other people were charged with assault with deadly weapon, attempted murder, aggravated assault. The other people meaning the occupants of the apartment at 2337. We were charged with various things and the party was

very sincere about making sure I got out first because I was pregnant and could possibly have my baby at any time due to the stress and everything that had happened. We had people that came from out of state, everywhere, it was just, Do you need anything? Can we work to raise money for, for bail? Can we make donations? What, what can we do? People came from everywhere. We solicited money from—the Black Panther Party solicited money from people that made donations, from going around to schools, to churches, every place you could think of, entertainers, anything, everything you could think of, in order to get money to raise money for our bail. And of course, our families gave whatever they could. They got me out of jail first. I went—some people that were very close with Fred gave me money and, Whatever you need to do with this in terms of your survival or in terms of other people's bond money, and I turned it over for bond money because other people were still in jail. [plane flies over] I went to the high school that I had graduated from to see who I can talk to about—

00:35:58:00

Interviewer:

[inaudible].

Deborah Johnson:

OK.

Interviewer:

Cars and—

[beep]

[cut]

00:36:02:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:36:06:00

Interviewer:

When you got out of prison, what kind of support had people organized for you in the community? How were, how were people responding and coping and dealing?

00:36:15:00

Deborah Johnson:

After I got out of jail, people came from everywhere to contribute whatever they could. Whether it was money, time, or just volunteering to answer the phones and calling people trying to get money to get us, to raise our bond money. They had rallies all over, California chapter sent us money, everybody sent us money, or whatever they could donate in terms of getting us out. Because one thing that was going on which I thought was really beautiful, they were taking people, *members of the Black Panther Party were taking people from the community through the apartment, so they can actually see what was going on.* Most of the newspaper accounts said that the police were met by a vicious attack by the Black Panther Party and the police were the victims, not the Black Panther Party. *People were able to go through house and they were lined up all around the block in the cold, in the wintertime to see what, what actually happened.* And anybody that went through that apartment could see that it was, in fact, not a vicious attack by the Black Panther Party on the police department but that people had been brutally killed. And that was evident from just going through the apartment, with the trajectories of the bullet holes, and how the beds were shot up and the door also. And they also had somebody from the party taking people through explaining this room, who was here, and what actually happened here.

00:37:51:00

Interviewer:

Now, in the weeks and months that followed, I gather you made a decision, you and, and the other survivors of the raid, made a decision not to testify as part of the grand jury inquest. Is—you recall that and how you made that decision and why? Can you tell me about that?

00:38:08:00

Deborah Johnson:

Yes. The survivors, as we came to be known, of the December 4th raid at the apartment made a conscious decision not to participate in the grand jury investigation because we felt that we would get no justice through this investigation, that the intent of this grand jury was not to really see what was going on. I just remembered something that I forgot about that grand jury investigation, which really even further cemented in my mind that I did not need to participate in this. I was sitting there and I was refusing to answer, I forgot on what grounds, what legal grounds I refused to answer.

00:39:02:00

Interviewer:

You can start over again, say you were sitting at the grand jury inquest—

Deborah Johnson:

OK.

Interviewer:

—and, and you had decided not to—

00:39:06:00

Deborah Johnson:

OK. I had, I was sitting at the grand jury investigation and had decided prior to being there that I would not participate in this investigation in terms of answering questions and, because I really felt this grand jury was not actually seeking the truth to find out what actually happened in the apartment. [plane flies over] What further cemented my belief that they were not actually trying to find out the truth, while sitting there, after they questioned me and I refused to answer on certain legal grounds, at which point I don't remember exactly, one of the officers of the court that was in the courtroom brought a bag out with the blankets that were on our bed with blood on it. And I felt at that time, These people—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Deborah Johnson:

—are trying to drive me crazy, they're not gonna do it, you know, and I just—

00:40:01:00

Interviewer:

We, we've run out of film. We're gonna change one more time.

Deborah Johnson:

OK.

Interviewer:

And just let you do that again.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #3030]

00:40:08:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:40:12:00

Interviewer:

OK. What, what happened at that grand jury inquest and, and, and how did it steel your resolve?

00:40:20:00

Deborah Johnson:

I had decided prior to going to the grand jury investigation that I would not participate because I felt that the grand jury was not actually seeking to find out the truth about what actually happened in the apartment. What further cemented my resolve not to participate in this grand jury investigation, while I was being questioned, at some point, some officer of the court brought in this big plastic bag with the blankets from the bed that Fred and I were in and it had blood on it and they just sat the bag down in front of me. And I remember thinking, These people are not gonna drive me crazy, I'm not gonna focus on this, but that was, like, You don't have to feel any guilt about not participating in this, you're doing the right thing and that gave me encouragement and more resolve in not participating in this.

00:41:13:00

Interviewer:

I, I wanna go back to something we were talking about earlier and remembering the way you had a growing awareness of the, the police and the police surveillance and, and ask you what you thought at the time about who was, who was behind what the police were doing. What kind of feelings did you have, what did you believe, what did you and other people in the party believe?

00:41:39:00

Deborah Johnson:

At the time we were in the Black Panther Party in 1969, we knew that we were being watched, that our phones were tapped, that we were being followed, that we would be—they would probably look up people that we had went to first grade with to ask them about us. But we really couldn't focus on that. We, we didn't let that stop us from what we needed to do. A lot of the things that we said about the police keeping files on people that were involved in the movement, about police surveillance, some of our, some of the people that I guess we labeled pseudo-liberals, Oh, those crazy Black Panthers, they're imagining, they're paranoid. Some people that were, let's say, not, didn't have a revolutionary concept of what we needed to do, that were, felt that they could work within the system and show America there are evils and things will be changed automatically once America became aware of what they were doing thought we were just a bunch of ranting and raving scared kids, you know, creating in our minds things that weren't actually happening. But however, it did come to light that files were kept on people that participated in the movement and you didn't have to be a Black Panther. You can just go in the office to get some free clothes that we were giving away or getting, getting free food and somebody could come and ask you, Well, who was up there? Who did you talk to? Who is this person? Have you seen this person before? What did they do? Did they say anything to you? You know, and you didn't have to be part of the Black Panther Party in order to be harassed or to be, have your phones wiretapped. If you got called more than twice, your phone could have been tapped. A lot of times, we'd pick up the phone and we'd hear a ta-tape recorder going and we'd hear people talking in the background. We didn't have a party line. And we'd be followed.

00:43:49:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut. I've asked all the questions I wanted to ask and you've answered them.

[beep]

[cut]

00:43:55:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:44:02:00

Interviewer:

Talk to me about the, about the party.

00:44:04:00

Deborah Johnson:

OK. [clears throat] Thinking back on all of this, I think what really fired me up about the Black Panther Party, and it all had to do with my, my brother bringing me this sign saying the Black Panthers are here, seeing them on television, hearing Fred speak, hearing about the programs that they were doing, it was that in my mind at this time, Black people's freedom and poor and oppressed people's freedom was not dependent upon the good will or the good nature of our oppressor, that we had the power to determine our own destiny. And the Black Panther Party, it, everything that they were doin' said that to me, that now, at this point in my life, I have some control over what my future is, you know, and not going to someone that sup—a system that's suppressing me, denying me. Not individually, collectively, education, housing, clothing, justice, and peace. I don't have to say, Can I have this? I have a right to fight for that and to get those things and I could make a difference and effect a change in the society. So I think that's what really fired me up about the Black Panther Party and really made me excited about working with them. Of course, Fred Hampton put, gave that to people [plane flies over] when he spoke and everybody could not, you know, bring that across. Everybody is not a speaker and everybody cannot convince you of their sincerity without putting a effort into convincing you, you just see it in everything they do and everything they say, but—

00:45:41:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK [inaudible]

Interviewer:

Have to wait for that airplane. [laughs]

Deborah Johnson:

[laughs]

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #1

OK, mark it.

[slate]

Interviewer:

Did that do the right thing? It flashed off. It wasn't moving.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Oh for—

00:45:56:00

Interviewer:

Cut for a second.

[beep]

[cut]

00:45:59:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:46:03:00

Interviewer:

OK, one, one more time. What was it that made the Black Panther Party [plane flies over] so crucial for you?

Deborah Johnson:

That's the plane again.

Interviewer:

Yeah, yeah. It's gone now.

00:46:17:00

Deborah Johnson:

One thing that, the main thing, I guess, that I remember, what really got me fired up about the Black Panther Party was it spoke to...it, it said that no longer do we have to depend on the good will of those that are oppressing us or denying us basic, our basic freedom. It, it, we're, we're not depending upon them to give us what we need to survive in this country. We have the power to determine our own destiny. That we have a right to fight and demand those things, and not only just with my brother bringing the flyer home with the Black Panther on it that appeared to be walking across the page. Not only with seeing Fred on the talk show and hearing him speak and all of this spoke to that, that we had the power to determine our own destiny. Of course, everybody cannot just speak and fire people up and have them believing in your sincerity, that you really believe in what you're doing. But Fred could do that, he could really bring it across without really putting an effort in trying to convince you, you just saw him work, you heard him speak and you knew that he believed in it and you believed it too, because you, you just get really dedicated about it because you're serious. You're about taking care of serious business and that's what it was, it wasn't a game.

00:47:46:00

Interviewer:

Great.

Deborah Johnson:

[laughs] One other thing I wanna say.

Interviewer:

OK, is it on?

00:47:50:00

Deborah Johnson:

One other, well, a couple other things. I remember when I was in jail going to court for the bond hearing for myself. I remember looking out of this window and seeing my brother and he's saying, Right on, sister, and that, and I felt so down like I was abandoned. And I didn't know if I was gonna be killed, if my baby was gonna be killed, and seeing my brother standing out there, saying, Right on, sister, that really made me feel good. Also when I was in jail, I was not going to let them search me. You know how they search you for drugs, in case you've put them inside your body, and it was a matron there and she was real rough looking and I was just, You're not gonna search me, and they said, [snaps fingers] Put her in the hole,

and I was terrified because I had heard all these stories about the hole where it's a little room with a hole in the ground and it's rats running around and all this. And so I, I let them search me but I really didn't wanna do that and talking about this reminded me of that.

00:48:46:00

Interviewer:

Thank you, thank you.

[beep]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:48:53:00

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