

Interview with **Coretta Scott King**

December 20, 1985

Production Team: A, B, C

Camera Rolls: 189-197

Sound Rolls: 1145-1148

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. 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*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 189]

[sound roll 1145]

[slate]

INTERVIEWER: JUST LOOK AT ME. WE'RE JUST HAVING A CONVERSATION IN THIS, IN THIS—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —WE'RE JUST HAVING A CONVERSATION IN THIS, SO. WE'RE GONNA START OFF IN 1955. YOU'VE BEEN IN MONTGOMERY FOR A VERY SHORT TIME, A YEAR. LESS THAN A YEAR. COULD YOU TALK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE CITY ITSELF AT THAT TIME WHEN YOU WERE THERE?

King: When we moved to Montgomery in 1955 it really was '54, September. The conditions of segregation and the humiliation that attended that was very complete. Blacks and whites were completely separated and there had been several incidents where blacks and whites were involved, but blacks attempting to ride the buses and where they had been beaten and dragged off, arrested and so on. And it was the cradle of the Confederacy, really, and no one ever expected any progress to be made in terms of race relations in Montgomery, in terms of it being the original place or the initiator. We were very happy there, though, in our church situation. Martin was the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. And that church had had a history of ministers that had been socially conscious and had been challenging the people to

do something about those conditions. He himself, the pastor just before Martin, the Reverend Johns, had called for a boycott. He had talked about other conditions that black people suffered under and challenged them to do something about it. So the situation seemed to have been ready to—for a leader. We did not know that it was the time of an idea when we arrived, but that's exactly what happened. The idea—it was an idea whose time had come. And Martin was there and, I think, I often say, that the man, the moment, and the situation came together. And the, the Montgomery movement started, really, when Rosa Parks sat down on that bus, December the 5th, 19—December the 1st, 1955.

INTERVIEWER: LET ME STOP YOU THERE. FIRST, FIRST—LET ME STOP FOR A MOMENT, PLEASE. ARE YOU—

[cut]

00:02:41:00

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —TO MONTGOMERY? YOU WERE RETURNING TO THE SOUTH. HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT?

King: Well, we were attracted to the South not necessarily to Montgomery, initially, because we both had a commitment to return to the South and to work in the South to try to bring about some changes in the situation of segregation and the, the lack of dignity and respect that among—from the black—white community toward the black community. Montgomery happened to be the place, because Martin was invited to, to the pastorate of that church, Dexter Avenue. And when he got the invitation, he said, this is the kind of church that I would like to begin my ministry in, because the congregation is an enlightened one and I can preach the way I want to and continue to develop in my ministry. Most of the people in Dexter Av—in the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church—Church had, at least, college education, more than ninety percent, and many of them were college professors. As a matter of fact, we had about eight or nine PhD's in our congregation. So that the, that the people who were in the church were the kind of people who could appreciate a young PhD just out of seminary with a lot of idealism and so on. Martin's idealism, of course, I think, became a combination of idealism and practical reality. I guess, bringing the reality and the ideal—idealism closer together as he moved over that first year and into what was to come, to be the destiny of his life.

00:04:48:00

INTERVIEWER: NICE ANSWER. NOW, BEFORE WE GET TO THE ACTUAL BOYCOTT, MAYBE YOU COULD JUST BRIEFLY DESCRIBE FOR US THE SYSTEM OF SEGREGATION ON THE BUSES. I, I THINK IT'S HARD FOR CHILDREN TODAY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED ON A SEGREGATED BUS.

King: Well, in Montgomery the buses were set up so that there was a separation between

blacks and whites. And there was a section for white people up front and a section for blacks from that point back, but it, it was something that was moveable. If there were no whites boarding the buses then the sign for blacks could be moved forward, but if most of the space was taken by whites then it would move backward. And if it happened to be that there were no seats left then black people would have to stand. Or if they decide to leave a certain section for whites then they would have to stand over those empty seats. And it was on that day that Mrs. Parks saw empty seats in the white section and there were none in the black section that she sat down. And when she sat down, that was when she was arrested.

00:06:16:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DO YOU THINK WAS, WAS THE MOST HUMILIATING PART OF IT? WAS IT THAT—I—IT'S, IT'S, IT'S AN INTERESTING QUESTION TO ME. I THINK SOMETHING ABOUT THE PUBLICNESS OF THE SITUATION. THAT YOU PAY, YOU'RE IN A PUBLIC—

King: Well, in some instances they would have you pay in the front where the driver was and then you'd walk out of the bus again and go to the back, particularly, when your section is in the back. And that happened, I guess, a lot of the time. Blacks would pay their money and then go out of the bus again to the back door and come in the back of the bus and take their seat. That was—that kind of obvious humiliation made people feel something was wrong with them. That they couldn't walk through the aisle to the seats, that they had to go outside and come back in where they were least exposed to the whites who were seated on the buses. And the way blacks were talked to, I mean, they never were—the way they were looked at even. I mean, there was always, you know, tension and feelings of resentment, it seemed, and hostility which made you feel less, less than, you know, human. And, and the way they were spoken to, the tone of voice and all. Very degrading. They were called by—not by their names or, or even—most times it would be, boy, girl, you get back, move over, let that lady pass. You know, anything, I mean, it was just always a reminder that you were less than. And I re—remember when, and this was true in Montgomery, when, when I was in school, we used to walk to school every day. A couple of miles. Even when we lived in the city to—I lived—I was born and reared in the country, but I went to the town of Marion to go to high school. And when the white children would, would meet us, they were going to their schools and we were going in the opposite direction and we were going to ours. And they would walk down the sidewalk and, and they, and they filled up the sidewalk and we would have to walk off of the sidewalk in order to let them, let them pass. And if you didn't walk off you would get knocked off or bumped into. It was that kind of thing. Or else you might end up into a fight and nobody wanted to get into a fight, because, you, you know, you could be arrested and that would be a real serious situation there. So it was always a very uneasy kind of a thing when you saw a group of white youngsters coming down the street and you had a similar group of black youngsters.

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S WONDERFUL. THAT'S VERY VIVID. STOP FOR A MOMENT?

[cut]

00:09:40:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: JUST A SEC.

INTERVIEWER: LET HIM GET SET.

King: Segregation was a way of life in the South and the South we returned to in Montgomery was the South pretty much as we left it. And if you were a person who was educated, lived in a black community, your living—where you lived, usually, you were segregated from whites. You'd—and if you worked as a professional you worked in your own institutions. You didn't have to encounter whites a lot, except when you go downtown and go into the stores. If you—most of us had cars, so we didn't have to ride the buses. It was the masses of people, the working people, who had to ride the buses. So one could avoid a lot of the day-to-day humiliations if you were so-called middle class. Cause we had, as I said, separate, our separate lives. We had our own community of, of professionals and so forth which was very small, but—

00:11:01:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

King: —it was there, nevertheless. So you didn't have to encounter it. Martin and I, therefore—

INTERVIEWER: WAIT, WAIT. KEEP THE THOUGHT RIGHT THERE. WE'RE GONNA MAKE A QUICK CHANGE HERE, SO.

00:11:12:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 190]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: HIT IT. JUST A SECOND.

INTERVIEWER: JUST LET HIM GET SETTLED AND CONTINUE WITH YOUR THOUGHT PROCESS. YOU WERE THINKING ABOUT THE CHALLENGES—

King: Martin and I were new to the—

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY, I STEPPED ON YOUR WORDS. START AGAIN. GO.

King: Martin and I were new to the community, therefore, our first, concern was to become adjusted in the community. To get to know people, to get involved with the church, and to, really, spend time trying to get to know the church people and to—for them to be comfortable with us and vice versa. And he was also working for—he was writing his dissertation, trying to finish that up the first year. However, he had presented a program to the church which they adopted in December of that year. We started there in September and then December his church program and budget were presented. And he had a very ambitious program. We were very excited about—the church people were very excited about what he had proposed, but he had to finish his dissertation. He got his doctorate in June of 1955. So then he was able to spend more time in the church. We had looked forward, in that second year, to spending a lot of time getting the church program going and all. And, as a matter of fact, I discouraged him from taking a position with the NAACP, as President, which he had been offered. And this was just a few days before—prior to December the 1st, 1955, when he told me he had been invited to serve as President and I said, well, you know, you need to really get your church program off the ground. And I hope you won't take that now. And he seemed as if he really wanted to. He was considering it. So one night he came home and he said, I've decided to take it. And I said, oh, no. And he says—by that time, he thought, you know, I really believed it. His mother was there, because my oldest child was just a few weeks old. And then he said, after he thought we were totally convinced, oh no, I was just kidding. And it was good that he didn't take it, because if he had taken it, it would have been a problem for him, later on, especially, as he became the spokesman for the movement.

00:13:52:00

INTERVIEWER: TALKING ABOUT THE START OF THE BOYCOTT. COULD YOU TALK ABOUT HOW YOU HEARD ABOUT IT AND WHAT YOUR HUSBAND'S REACTION WAS? WAS HE IMMEDIATELY WILLING TO REALLY BE PART OF IT AND LEAD IT OR DID HE HAVE TO REALLY THINK ABOUT IT?

King: Well, he had no thought that—Martin and I were home, I believe, when, together, when the phone call came from E. D. Nixon who was a, a, a leader in the community. He was the President of the NAACP and had worked very actively in the community on some of these problems and had called for black people to kind of rise up and do something about it. And he felt that this was an opportunity with these young ministers being in town, Dr. King was at Dexter and Reverend Abernathy was at First Baptist Church. And they were very good friends and working together. And he called the both of them, separately of course, and suggested that there ought to be a boycott of those buses. And he started giving background on the history of what had happened with black people; he confrontations that had taken place over the years. And, I think, in the conversation, as I understand it, that they had. They

decided from that they would call together the ministerial group and some leaders. And that meeting—Martin offered to have that meeting at his church, but it would be the head of the ministerial association, the, the ministers—it was the Black Ministers' Alliance [sic] that would spearhead it and then the other leadership was invited in. They had the meeting at Dexter and things didn't go well. The first, the first night that they had this meeting, because somehow the person who was involved in the leadership, perhaps, was not the best person to chair the meeting. But somehow they got through it and they did make some plans. The plans, the plans called for a one-day boycott of the buses on December the 5th. And they sent out leaflets all over town and they talked to the ministers to go to their congregations on Sunday and encourage them to stay off the buses, for one day, to protest this very dreadful situation of Mrs. Parks' being arrested. And they all were very excited about it. But then the thing that made for more excitement was the fact that one of the leaflets was picked up and—by a maid and taken to work with her and her mistress or her boss found it or took it and read it and then she called the local newspaper and wanted them to publicize what these blacks were up to. So everybody would know about it in the white community. Well, that was really a great way to publicize our cause. And nobody signed it, you know, they didn't know who was doing it. The, the whole idea was not to put anybody's name out there. And they realized that there would be some retaliation. So they were trying to get it started before anyone was identified with it. So [coughs] the Monday night, December the 5th, there was to be a mass meeting at the Holt Street Baptist Church. In the afternoon of, of the 5th, there was another meeting of the leadership. And at that was the time when they decided to form an organization. And in the process of forming an organization they had to select a leader, a spokesperson, a president. And when Martin got to the meeting, he was a little late, and they were talking about the leadership and they were discussing the fact that who's, whoever named, whose name was, was projected that that person might become a target. And, I think, then people began to sort of resist the whole idea. And when E. D. Nixon proposed Martin's name, you know, *Martin said, well, you know, I'm not sure I'm the best person for this position, since I'm new in the community. And, but if, if no one else is going to serve, you know, someone has to do it. And, I'd be glad to, I'd be glad to try to do it. And, of course, I guess, everybody then assured him they wanted him. So he came home very excited about the fact that he had to give the keynote speech that night at the mass meeting. He only had twenty minutes to prepare his speech.* So, I was thinking to myself, how wonderful it would be if I could get out of this house and go, but my baby was a few weeks old and my doctor said you have to stay in for a whole month. You know, I didn't have any problems having the baby, but to, to stay in a whole month that was what was re—required by my doctor. So I was going to be obedient. But then Martin went to his study and he made an outline, as he very often did, and, naturally, he couldn't write a speech in twenty minutes that was so fateful, really. I mean, that, that particular occasion was to determine the, the future, the destiny of that whole movement. And, I think, he understood that, because the boycott had been so effective all day. Martin said it had been ninety-nine and nine-tenths per—percent, I believe, effective. And, therefore, if people came out in large numbers that night, then we really had, you know, a movement and we had to find a way to continue it. And being the spokesman was a trem—pretty tremendous job. An awesome job, really. And not even knowing where it was leading. So when he got there, he told me when he returned that, that there were so many people, they couldn't get near the church. And they, when they got, finally got up to the church, they almost had to be carried over the shoulders

of people, he and Reverend Abernathy, in order to get to the pulpit. And, of course, the excitement of the crowd certainly generated great enthusiasm and inspiration in Martin. And he made, I think, a very important speech that really did determine which direction the movement would go as well as the tone. I guess maybe more importantly, the tone of the movement. It was to be a nonviolent movement. And he called for Christian love and to not retaliate with violence. That no matter what violence was perpetrated against us that we must not retaliate, but that we must love our white brother and let him know that we love them. And that we must continue to struggle in a determined manner so that we would—if we would do that and we would, you know, and do it—I mean, as he called for a kind of unity that he felt that the future generations would have to say that—pause and say that there lived a people, a black people, a great people who injected a new meaning into our civilization. And this was, you know, our overwhelming challenge, our responsibility, and our overwhelming challenge and our responsibility, I believe is what he said. Fortunately, I got someone to tape it. So we have a copy of the speech which we were able to use in the film, the documentary, “Montgomery to Memphis,” which really gave a very important—

00:22:16:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

King: —beginning.

INTERVIEWER: I, I IN FACT WOULD LIKE TO—I WANTED TO MAKE A NOTE TO MYSELF TO TALK ABOUT—

00:22:24:00

[cut]

[change to camera roll 191]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK, FLAGS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: HIT IT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: THANK YOU.

INTERVIEWER: AS SOON AS BOBBY’S SET. AND YOU WANNA REMEMBER WE’RE JUST HAVING A CONVERSATION.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK, JULES.

King: Martin found himself in the leadership of a movement that was applying a technique that had been applied very successfully in India. The technique of nonviolence. And it was not something that he had, he had thought it through to a large extent, in terms of how nonviolence could be applied, but he had not thought through exactly, I'm sure, how he would do it in a particular situation. He went back and read books on Gandhi and on, I'm sure, he must have read, I think, I heard him say Thoreau and the things that he had studied in college, in theo—theological seminary and, and, and also in his studies for his doc—doctorial degree and all of that. But then, I think, he—his greatest source was from, I think, the Bible and the teachings of, of Christ. Because as a Christian minister, he felt that his understanding, of course, of nonviolence was that nonviolence was based on, on a certain principles that were the same principles that, as a Christian, he had em—embraced. Love. The foundation of the Christian faith is, is love and, and, of course, truth, is another very important ten—tenet. And, and he understood love in the unconditional sense. And he also understood, you know, that the—in the life of Christ, he had demonstrated, in his own life, I think, an example of nonviolence and, and in terms of his ability to not—to become a part of an unjust system, to cooperate with it, but to also, you know, condemn it and to, as Christ would, to change it. He said, I got my motivation from Jesus. My motivation and inspiration from Jesus and my techniques from Gandhi. And when he was criticized about boycotting, because you would put individuals out of business, the nonviolent philosophy says you don't focus on the individual, but on the system. It was the system of segregation that had caused individuals to behave unjustly. And so, he said, I'm not trying to put anybody out of business. I'm just trying to put justice in business. And when you, when you understand that, that this is what you really have to do in order to follow the nonviolent discipline and—which is, if it's followed, it becomes a transforming force, as well, for change. I mean, the actions of the individuals are, are effective, but you do it in a spirit of recon—love and reconciliation. You don't do it in a way that you tried to, to, to really hurt the individual personality. Personality is sacred and he, he—and it's to be respected. But it's the behavior that we wanted to change and that is what he became to, to understand. And, I think, at that point then he felt much better about, you know, about his actions. But when it's raised in the media, when it's raised by individuals, you do have to think about it. And I think he grew in his understanding and his ability to, I think, articulate the meaning of nonviolence and to translate nonviolence into a kind of action program. Because that's what Gandhi was able to do.

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT.

[cut]

00:26:58:00

INTERVIEWER: TO DESCRIBE—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —ONE OF THE MASS MEETINGS. JUST THINK OF ONE AND LET US—TAKE US THERE IN A WORD PICTURE OF IT.

King: *The mass meetings, usually, were attended by the maids and cooks and janitors and people who really used the buses a lot. And* they would leave work and come to the church very early. And they would start prayer services. I think people look forward to coming to the church where they could just kind of, you know, in a sense, relax and fellowship and commune and, I think, be renewed and inspired. I think the prayers and the singing served as, as a kind of a therapeutic thing for, for them in terms of giving them the strength to, to continue the next day. And as Christian people, they believed very much, you know, in prayer and the songs of, of the faith and all. And just, just people coming together in, in solidarity and having and sharing some of the same kinds of experiences. It helped them to go back out the next day to face whatever insults that they were gonna have to face. And when you think about some of those people who really were, were working for people who, who really were very angry and who would talk about the leadership and they'd have to listen to that and not say a word. I mean, they'd have to—and maybe some of them would listen and almost agree knowing that they didn't agree. You know, it was because they—in those days you, you couldn't express your feelings if you were on that other end, you know. As, as a person who worked for someone cause they—very often, they'd been good to them in terms of helping them with their families, doing extra things. They didn't pay 'em very much, but they would do other things for them and, and, I think, they loved them in a patronizing kind of way, you know, paternalistically. There were some genuine, genuine relationships, I'm sure. There were some. Then *they would be there, singing and praying for hours, sometimes before the program actually started. The main part of the mass meeting.* I think the mass meetings started around seven, seven-thirty. And by the time the leadership got there, the clergy, and all and they started the main part of the program, which was to discuss where things were and whatever incidents that had taken place, to keep them informed, and then to give them strategy, direction on the strategies the next, the next step and all of that. And cause people would wait to get the word. What's Dr. King's gonna say? *Dr. Abernathy would speak first, usually. And he would, he had the ability to really make them laugh and maybe make them cry some.* I mean, but, 'cause he would, he told jokes. He, he, *he really knew how to, you know, kind of get them in the mood,* so they could sit and listen to what Dr. King had to say. And so, the combination of the two styles was very good, very helpful, I think. Not that Reverend Abernathy wasn't ever serious, but he really had that ability to kind of, you know, speak to people right where they, they were at the moment. And, *I guess you'd call it a kind of folksy quality. He was able to do that because that was a part of his style. Whereas with Martin, he was more, I guess, what you would consider formal and he would come along with, with a very thoughtful message,* a very analytical message. His main message usually was. And then, as a preacher, I mean, he got emotional and involved in his message, but by the time he got to that point, I mean, they had listened and they had understood what he was talking about and with the sincerity that he had, you know, and his great oratory and his charisma and all of that. And he moved people. He persuaded them, you know, when he talked to them about the meaning of not—of, of being willing to absorb the suffering and even the physical blows without retaliating and what this would mean in terms of, of the kind of, being a, a kind of redeeming force for change. And that, making them feel very good about what they were doing and that they were making a contribution just by being there, by putting their bodies, so to speak, on the line. By being a part of the protest and being identified with it. He also helped them to

understand that maybe there were some people who could not be there. Because they, they played a different role. But those people gave funds and supported. Maybe not everyone has to be here, physically, and be seen. Cause if you worked for the state in those days or you were a teacher, you may not be able to come to a mass meeting and, and keep your job. But—

00:32:59:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

King: —some people had enough courage to lose their job. He talked about its important—what we're doing is so important. It's important enough to lose a job. I mean, a job is not important.

INTERVIEWER: WE NEED TO MAKE A STOP AND CHANGE HERE.

00:33:11:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 192]

[change to sound roll 1146]

INTERVIEWER: I DON'T THINK WE'RE ROLLING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SECOND STICKS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: YOU READY?

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SECOND STICKS.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: AND, AND HOW WOULD THEY, WOULD THEY END WITH SINGING?

King: What happened throughout the mass meeting is that there were songs interspersed. They had an order of service and so they would—what, what would happen when they would come and sing, without, without an instrument at all sometimes they would do what you call

the long meter. And the—with the hymns of, of the church and so on. Was that they would have someone who played the piano or the organ, and they would start, you know, just like they started the church services, really. And they would sing the songs and hymns of the church. “What a friend we have in Jesus, what a fellowship, what a joy divine, leaning on the everlasting arm.” They may sing, “Lord, I want to be a Christian in My Heart,” which is a spiritual, and they would for a long—I guess, throughout Montgomery and into maybe as far as into Albany, I—they—there was not a lot of use of what we called freedom songs. They would do the spiritual, “Oh, freedom over me, freedom before I be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free,” and—or they would sing, “Go down Moses, way down in Egypt’s land,” but aside from that, these were spirituals, they were mostly things that they knew and it was later, as I said, that the, the spirituals were taken and they substituted words and made them more relevant to what we were doing.

INTERVIEWER: WE’LL GET TO THOSE LATER.

King: Yes. And, and so they would end, of course, after Martin’s message with, with a, a song and a prayer, a benediction, and prayer. And everybody would go home, you know, feeling, you know, good and inspired and ready to go back the next morning to a long day of, well, you know, what—work, hard work. But they, I think, they could take it a little bit better, really, even the work that they—that had been difficult became easier. It was something about that experience that gave you all—gave all of us so much, so much hope and, and inspiration and as the more we got into it, the more we, we had the feeling that something could be done about the situation. That we could change it. And that—

00:35:57:00

INTERVIEWER: DO, DO YOU THINK THAT, THAT YOUR HUSBAND WAS EVER DISCOURAGED ACTUALLY ON—IN, IN THIS TIME? DO YOU REMEMBER ANY PARTICULAR TIMES WHEN HE SAID, THIS ISN’T GONNA WORK, WE CAN’T GO ON?

King: Well, I, I don’t think he said it that way. There were moments when he was, you know, he was not—he didn’t know quite which way to go and what, quite what to do next and, you know. That there these moments when you, when you’re not sure what is going to happen and what is the best strategy to use. I think there were times in the early struggle. But what they did was to sit down together and they would, they would plan and they would come up with a, a way around the situation. I think that the times when it looked as if they were going to try to enjoin the carpool, through the courts, to stop, to stop them or when they were rounding up all of the leadership and arresting them, there’s always a concern if you take all the leaders to jail, who’s gonna lead? And Martin did not like to go, go to jail first. He would let others go and then when they were doing a, a, a campaign that was extended and then he would go toward the end. Because he needed to, to, to stay there to keep the momentum going and to generate support, you know, around the country. And this was later on.

INTERVIEWER: BUT, BUT WHAT ABOUT THAT FIRST TIME WHEN HE WENT—

King: I'm, [coughs]—

INTERVIEWER: COME ON.

00:37:42:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

King: [coughs] I'm gonna have to stop.

00:37:43:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH. JUST A SECOND.

INTERVIEWER: AND SO THAT EVEN IN THAT FIRST TIME THERE WAS NO FEELING OF SHAME AT BEING CONVICTED?

King: M—Martin had talked about the, the necess—the necessity to go to jail for what we believed in. For what they believed in, for the righteous cause, and he kept saying, our cause is just. We are, we are moving on the side of God and God is with us in our struggle and we are right. And, I think, people felt that there was a rightness and he said, it, it means, it means su—it means suffering and sacrificing, and going to jail, and we will go to jail proudly and we will transform these dungeons of shame into a haven of freedom and justice. I mean, you know, he had a way of turning words and phrases that, you know, would, would inspire people and so that most people went to jail gladly and willingly. They were, you know, going to jail for my freedom, is—it's quite different from going to jail because I've committed a crime, because I think they always knew that it was not a crime. Their only crime was that they wanted freedom and that was a great way in which to express it by going to jail as a protest against it. So that you inspire many others and that you do something about changing that system as you continue to fill the jails cause he really encouraged 'em to fill the jails.

00:39:14:00

King: [coughs]

INTERVIEWER: WHEN IT COMES TO FILLING JAILS NOT IN MONTGOMERY WE WEREN'T, IN MONTGOMERY WE WEREN'T FILLING THE JAILS. SO WE'LL COME TO THAT THOUGH. I'M, I'M JUST GONNA FINISH OFF THE

MONTGOMERY THING. ACTUALLY, ONLY TWO MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT MONTGOMERY. WE'LL GET INTO THE, THE FULLER MOVEMENT TIMES. ONE THOUGHT IS THAT AT THE BEGINNING OF MONTGOMERY, THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT, DR. KING WAS A, A LOCAL PREACHER.

King: [coughs]

INTERVIEWER: A, A YOUNG MAN WHO HAD JUST FINISHED HIS DISSERTATION WAS IN HIS FIRST PULP—MAJOR, MAJOR ROLE, HAD HIS FIRST CONGREGATION. AT THE END OF IT HE WAS A NATIONAL LEADER. AND I'M WONDERING WHAT THAT MEANT TO YOU, AS HIS WIFE? IT MUST HAVE BEEN A, A BIG CHANGE FOR YOU.

King: I think it was a, an evolution that we were all experiencing because I was very much involved as an activist in college. So that when Montgomery started, you know, I was very excited about all this, because my only, really regret, was that I could not be there all the time when the action was taking place, but I was there in spirit. The movement started spontaneously and our home became the place where everybody met. Where—it was a gathering place. It was—the focus was really right there in the parsonage. Where the leadership came, so much of the time, to meet, and so I was able to keep abreast of everything to it. And I watched the news. A lot of my husband's interviews were held at the house. Most of the people who visited Montgomery, and there were people who started coming from all around the world, very quickly. The news spread fast, you know, fifty thousand people. This had never happened anywhere where fifty thousand black people stood up in solidarity and, and, and were boycotting the buses and it was working. So that was quite a phenomenon. And it attracted attention as far away as South Africa. Cause in that year, it was reported by the press that there was a boycott in Johannesburg, South Africa. There was one in Tallahassee, Florida. One in Mobile that the Reverend Lowery led and one in Birmingham that Fred Shuttlesworth, and, of course, C. K. Steele in Tallahassee. And in Atlanta, later, Reverend William Holmes Borders led the one in Atlanta. So there were all these movements springing up right after Montgomery during the year '56, and people from the North were so excited and they were coming. I mean, people were coming from all over just to, to talk, to be with people, to see what they could do, to give encouragement. If they were white it was more difficult for them to be visible. But they would give support, but blacks were, you know, offering support and wanting to be a part of and, naturally, they didn't live there, so boycotting the buses, it was difficult for them to, to help very much with that except by not patronizing. But with morale and things, they would come and visit the meetings. And just to have these people coming in and, and, and telling us how proud they were, and how, how they felt, you know, more like human beings, because somewhere people were standing up for, for freedom. And, and they know that they would win and, you know, things of this kind really encouraged us to continue. Now, when Martin first was arrested was for a traffic violation which they—it was a rather trumped-up charge. And that was in January of 1956 early. And, and, and, and that was going alone. You know, he did go alone. I mean, that was not planned. There were times when he went to jail when it wasn't planned. But when they planned to go to jail that's when, you know, people were prepared. Because a part of the process of nonviolence is preparation.

00:43:17:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW IN TERMS OF THAT JANUARY, THERE WAS—

King: [coughs]

INTERVIEWER: NO. I WONDER IF I SHOULD ASK YOU ABOUT THE, THE, THE TIME THE HOUSE WAS BOMBED IN JANUARY OF '56. NOW WHY DO YOU THINK THAT, THAT YOUR—DR. KING'S REACTION WAS NO RETALIATION. HE WAS VERY CLEAR ABOUT THAT. WHAT DO YOU THINK GAVE HIM THAT STRENGTH TO, TO NOT BE ANGRY ABOUT HIS WIFE AND HIS CHILD BEING UNDER ATTACK?

King: Well, I think it was his, his—first of all, his understanding of the Christian faith. What it means to be truly Christian, because we are taught that we shouldn't—not hate. We should love even our enemies. We are taught that, that we must forgive, I mean, and we must, do it many, many times not just one time. I think there's one passage that says seventy times seven. [coughs]

00:44:19:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

King: And, and so Martin was understanding that, you know, if he was true to his commitment to the Christian ministry that he had a responsibility to fight for the liberation of his people, because Christianity is a liberating religion. [coughs]

INTERVIEWER: WE SHOULD CHANGE.

00:44:39:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 193]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK IT.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU FEEL PERSONALLY WHEN THE BOYCOTT WAS OVER? DID YOU THINK YOU'D WON THE WAR?

King: I knew that this was the beginning of many struggles, but I thought that the fact that we were successful in desegregating the buses and that this led to not only Montgomery buses being desegregated, but it would—it was a, a, an action that would cause the desegregation of buses trans—and transportation of these—transportation anywhere where it was segregated. And we knew that once we broke the barrier that it would be easier for other areas of segregation to be e—eliminated. And we knew that we would have to go on. *At first, we didn't even ask for desegregation. We only asked for a, a more humane system of segregation in, on the buses. And when the opposition refused to grant that, then we realized that they wouldn't grant anything anyway, so we might as well ask for, you know, complete desegregation. And, that's what we went for, and we realized we had to go for broke, so to speak [sic]—speak.* So, the, the fact that people were able to stick together for that length of time and that there was a favorable ruling from the courts on this, it meant that the courts—the climate was created around which the courts could act. And we realized that what we had to do was to take each situation, you know, separately and continue to work on it until we had achieved that desegregation of public accommodations, and then the right to vote, and so on.

00:46:46:00

INTERVIEWER: WERE YOU, WERE YOU EXHILARATED? DID YOU AND YOUR HUSBAND CELEBRATE?

King: Well, we didn't actually have a celebration of that kind. Martin helped the, the following to understand that you, when you have a, a victory or when you, you achieve the goal that you've set, that you don't—you take it humbly. You know, he, he said, when we go back to the buses we're not gonna go back bragging about the fact that, you know, we won. But that we go back and we try to win friends with those people, you know, who were not friendly with us before, because part of the process of nonviolence is to achieve a reconciliation of when, when the struggle has been won. And if you do it nonviolently it is, it is more—it is easier to, to have that that kind of, of a reconciliation take place. But if it's violent then it's almost impossible. And so where we had a great sense of fulfillment in what we had done, and Montgomery itself was a period in my life that I just, I feel, I felt so much fulfillment. It was a realization of a lot of things in terms of where I should be, what I should be doing with my own life. I came to realize that that I was supposed to be involved in, to be there. That when I had made the decision to mar—marry Martin that that was the decision that would determine my destiny. I knew that, but then I—it was like having a realization and a moment of truth in the situation that, that reaffirmed the feeling that I had that perhaps this would lead to, when I made the decision, that it would lead to a, a different kind of life. And that there was a destiny involved. So this was sort of like, yeah, there had to be, because this kind of a thing could never just happen. Not in Montgomery, Alabama. Not, you know, here's a young man who'd not had any experience, but all of a sudden he emerges as the leader and the spokesperson and a great hero of the people. A great symbol of the aspirations and hopes of, of millions of people by that time.

00:49:27:00

INTERVIEWER: I'M GONNA JUMP YOU AHEAD A LITTLE BIT HERE TO 1960. AND I'M GONNA ASK YOU FOR JUST A, A SERIES OF LITTLE SHORT STORIES OF, OF, OF HOW YOU REMEMBER THINGS. I'M THINKING ABOUT THE, THE TIME THAT DR. KING IS JAILED FOR PARTICIPATING WITH THE STUDENTS IN A SIT-IN IN, IN THE DEPARTMENT STORE IN ATLANTA, IN RICH'S DEPARTMENT STORE. AND I—COULD YOU JUST GIVE US A LITTLE DESCRIPTION OF YOUR FEARS ABOUT HIS SAFETY AT THAT TIME?

King: [pause] Well, I was expecting my third child which was, who's Dexter, who is now twenty-four, almost twenty-five. And, I guess, when you're pregnant you, you feel more insecure with your husband being away. And being in jail for any length of time is always a problem. Mar—Martin had decided earlier on in Montgomery that he would not bail himself out of jail whenever he went. He would stay there and, and, and as a part of, of the protest or a part of the nonviolent strategy to, to stay in jail until something had changed in terms of granting part of what, what, what was being asked or what have you. In the early days, everybody was arrested and got out of jail, but, but what, what, [coughs] what I, I think happened when we came to Atlanta and was arrested at Rich's is that he had already decided he would not accept bail unless something happened in the situation that had improved it. And so, when he—I knew he was gonna stay in jail, then, and I was expecting. It just created a lot more of a hardship cause I wanted to visit with him, because I know, he really didn't like to go to jail. He used to say, anyone who has any sense does not like to go to jail all the time. He said, but I go to jail because I must. And, and he felt it was necessary for someone to do it. And if that was his role and the price he had to pay to free some people, he would be willing to do that. So as I was expecting and having to go back and forth to jail, you know, it was very tiring and wearying, but I expected Martin to come out of jail when everybody else came out, once there was a settlement reached. And I found out, when the rest of them left, they let them out and there was some settlement made between the department store and the business community and all, and, and the student, and the leadership of the movement. They kept Martin. And we didn't understand why. And it took a while for me to find out, why Martin couldn't come out of jail. And being pregnant as I was, I was very immediately depressed, because I had expected to see him. And when they said he had to be taken to DeKalb County, because this was Fulton County in Atlanta where he was, then I didn't understand what was gonna happen. And then, finally, I found out it was about a traffic charge that had, that had been made earlier. And that the judge had discretionary powers even. And that really disturbed me, but we went to court and we had good lawyers, in DeKalb County, and we thought that he was gonna have to—he would come out soon. But the judge, after the hearing, said, I, I find the defendant guilty and sentence him to six months' hard labor in the Reidsville State Penitentiary. And I wasn't expecting it. And it was just like, you know, almost like a bombshell. And the students were very upset and my sister-in-law was upset and we were all feeling so tense that—

INTERVIEWER: CAN WE STOP FOR A MOMENT, PLEASE? I'M SORRY. YOU HAD GOTTEN TO THE POINT—

00:53:49:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: —OF SAYING THAT YOU WERE REALLY UPSET.

00:53:51:00

[cut]

INTERVIEWER: —TELL—YOU CAN ROLL.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: I THINK WE CAN TELL ABOUT THE, THE, THE LEADING UP TO THE CALL FROM JOHN KENNEDY—

King: OK.

INTERVIEWER: —BUT IF YOU WOULD JUST TELL US ABOUT GETTING IT.

King: Just tell us how that happened.

INTERVIEWER: WE CAN, WE CAN TELL HOW, HOW YOU, YOU TRIED TO GET THROUGH TO HIM—

King: OK.

INTERVIEWER: —BUT IF YOU COULD JUST TELL US WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO HEAR FROM HIM AND WHAT THAT MEANT.

King: Let me—Martin disliked being in jail, as I said, intensely. And while I was trying to think of a way to get to see him, eight hours, maybe, away by car and being pregnant, I had this very uplifting thing to happen. And it was a call from Senator Kennedy, John F. Kennedy. He called and said, Mrs. King, how are you? I understand that you are expecting your third child and I just wanted you to know that I was thinking about you and Dr. King and concerned about your well-being. This must be very difficult for you. And I said, yes, it is. And he said, well, I just want you to know that if there's anything I can do to be of help, to please, call on me. Feel free to call on me. And I said, well I appreciate this so much and I would appreciate anything that you could do to be of help. Cause I didn't know what else to say. I was really not quite sure what the motivation was of this call. He was running for

office and, and this was just a few days before the election in November—in October, late October. And I, I understood all the political implications—

00:55:48:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

King: —so I didn't know what to say. But I was very pleased—

INTERVIEWER: UGH! UGH! I—JUST RUN OUT.

00:55:54:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 194]

[change to sound roll 1147]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKING.

INTERVIEWER: JUST SITTING WHILE HE GETS HIMSELF SET HERE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK. AND LOOK AT ME.

King: I was very depressed about Martin being in jail and being so far away and knowing I couldn't get to see him in less than a whole day's journey and back. And, and suddenly I got this very unexpected, but uplifting telephone call from Senator John F. Kennedy. And he was campaigning and was at O'Hare Airport and called and said, hello, Mrs. King. This is Senator Kennedy and I'm calling because I wanted to let you know I was thinking about you. How are you? I understand you are expecting your third child. I was amazed that, you know, he even said third child. Someone, of course, had to tell him, but anyway it was a very personal touch and *he said, I've been thinking about you and your husband, and I know this must be very difficult for you. If there's anything I can do to be of help, I want you to please feel free to call on me. And, I didn't quite know what to say except to thank him and say, well, I really appreciate this and if there is anything that you can do, I would deeply appreciate it.* And, of course, knowing the implications of all of this, he, he was—it was toward the, the end of the month of October and the election was just a few days away, the

presidential election. And I didn't quite know what to make of it. Very shortly afterwards, a reporter called and said, I understand the Senator Kennedy called you. What did he say? And I said, well, why don't you ask him? I said, [laughs] you know, I, I really don't feel free to tell you. Why don't you ask him? So anyway, my father-in-law and I were on our way to see a lawyer, because we were trying to figure out a way to get Martin out of jail legally. Cause we knew the judge had discretionary powers and the only legal recourse was probably through the Board of Corrections. In the meantime, I called, when I returned from this visit to the lawyer, I returned, I, I, I made a call to Senator Kennedy's campaign and spoke to a person that I knew, Harris Wofford, who was working with Senator Kennedy. And I told him about this call and asked him his advice. He said, oh, tell them. He said, there were a lot of reporters around and there, and there were, you know, some of the human rights people. And so, it's all right, you just tell them what happened. So then I started receiving more phone calls and, of course, I did report it. But that call was a very important call. I think it, it did turn the tide, because Martin was released from jail in, I guess, in about—the next day, actually, the next day. This was on the day that he had been taken to Reidsville that I got the call and the next day he was released late in the day. And then we went to a mass meeting that night, as we usually did, to go to our churches to have a meeting. And Daddy King said, you know, this was the first time we'd had a Catholic to run for President and most black people were like most other Americans about Catholics, I guess. We were not sure about Nixon, but Nixon had befriended a lot of people. And so, Daddy King said, I have a sackful of votes and I'm gonna take 'em to the White House and place 'em at Senator Kennedy's feet. And, of course, essentially what he was saying, that is, he was gonna vote for him. And actually, I think the difference in that election, which was very close, had to do with Martin's—his intercession in Martin's case. Because Senator Kennedy won by a very narrow margin of less than an hundred thousand votes.

01:00:22:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU KNOW, OK, THAT, THAT TOOK CARE OF THE LAST THREE QUESTIONS. [laughs] I DON'T HAVE TO ASK YOU THEM. I'M GONNA GO AHEAD TO ALBANY, HERE. WYATT TEE WALKER SAID TO US THAT IF SCLC HAD HAD MORE CONTROL OF THINGS, IF THEY'D HAD STRONGER CONTROL, AND DOCTOR—KING HAD STRONGER CONTROL, THINGS WOULD HAVE TURNED OUT BETTER IN ALBANY. DO YOU THINK THAT DR. KING WAS, WAS HIMSELF FRUSTRATED ABOUT, ABOUT THE, THE LACK OF COHERENCE IN, IN ALBANY?

King: Well, I don't think that—I mean, I, I, I just talk, I mean, I'm not speaking about what Reverend Walker said, I'm speaking about what I understood of Albany and what I think the difficulty was in Albany. And, I think, Albany is perhaps one of the least understood of the campaigns. We were dealing with a more humane police force, number one. Law enforcement body and they, they did what they were supposed to do. When you break the law, what do you expect? You expect to get arrested and go to jail. In, in other communities they were more brutal. They were more inhumane and there were confrontations. And very often, it was the confrontations that caused people to pay attention to what was going on. In Albany we had a federal injunction placed against us. And *when the federal court started ruling against us, that created a whole different thing in terms of what strategy do you use*

now? Because up to that point, Martin had been willing to break state laws that were unjust laws and our ally was the federal judiciary. And so, if we would take our case to the federal court and the federal court ruled against us, what recourse did we have? So we were working in concert with the federal laws, all the time, in the South up to that point. But—so what we were—he was asking Senator Kennedy, I mean, President Kennedy and the Attorney General, Bobby Kennedy, for an intercession in Albany. That, that they needed, he needed some intercession. He was asking them, the Justice Department, to intercede as a friend of the court. So that that injunction could be lifted. Because if you break the federal injunction that would be a problem. And that was essentially the problem in Albany.

01:03:00:00

INTERVIEWER: WAS HE FRUSTRATED BY ALBANY, DO YOU THINK?

King: Naturally, you would be frustrated if you were pleading to the Federal Government, who was friendly, and they did not act. You see, it's un—it's important to understand this and I have to go further for people to understand what I'm saying.

INTERVIEWER: WE ARE GONNA TALK ABOUT THIS WITH OTHER SPEAKERS TOO. I MEAN WE ARE—

King: No, no, I want to say this if I—

INTERVIEWER: SURE.

King: —even if you don't take it on. What I'm saying is that in Birmingham, for instance, in Birmingham, for instance, he made the decision that he would break the injunction. But he had a situation in Birmingham with the brutality that caused the nation to rise up against that. So he had, you know, sort of a more moral authority in Birmingham, because of the reaction of the opposition.

INTERVIEWER: STOP. WE'RE GONNA TAKE THIS AGAIN CAUSE I—

[cut]

01:03:56:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLLING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKING.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S A VERY IMPORTANT POINT AND I DO WANT TO HEAR THAT, PLEASE.

King: For instance, in Birmingham we had a federal injunction and see—it had, it begin to be a strategy of the opposition to stop the movement. They started in Albany and it caught us off guard. So in Birmingham, when the federal injunction was placed, Albany had become a learning ground and Martin had decided that he was gonna go against that federal injunction and go on to jail and take that risk and whatever, come whatever. But we had in Birmingham a different situation. We had a more inhumane and brutal police force and what they were able to do was arouse the conscience of the nation in support of the demonstrators, because they brought out the fire hoses and the dogs and all of that. And because of that, Martin began to, to have the moral authority on his side and he went to jail in, in Birmingham despite the fact that there was a federal injunction. He broke it. The fact is that he had to serve time, even in 1967, as late as December 1967. He had to go back to Birmingham and serve five days, because of that, that he broke that law. He went willingly, but the fact is that if people don't understand that they, they, they talk about all other kinds of reasons why Albany didn't work. Albany didn't work because it was a new tactic that had come and I'm not sure the opposition even realized it fully. But Martin began to realize it, because he kept hoping and pleading to, to Burke Marshall. I heard him on the telephone, saying, we need some help down here. You know, he said, we've got to have some—a victory in order to keep, you know, people in the movement inspired. And, and, and so the only thing they could do, then, was to try to fill up the jails. When we all decided to go to jail and the wives were gonna lead the march, I was gonna lead it along with Jean Young and Juanita Abernathy and others. They decided to let Martin and Ralph out of jail and that sort of took the steam out of what we were doing. I mean, they were very clever. And the others were not as smart as that in many of the other places.

01:06:30:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW YOU HAD A BABY FOUR DAYS BEFORE DR. KING HEADED OUT FOR BIRMINGHAM, FOR THE BIRMINGHAM CAMPAIGN. WAS THAT HARD? WAS THAT A PARTICULARLY HARD TIME FOR YOU?

King: Birmingham was a very difficult time. I had, by that time, my last baby, four children. We were waiting for the baby to come so Martin could go to jail, but the movement had already started.

01:06:55:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

King: A lot of people had already been arrested. So—

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY. THAT REALLY WENT VERY FAST THAT ROLL.

01:07:03:00

[cut]

[change to camera roll 195]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLLING.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK IT.

INTERVIEWER: HOW YOU FELT? WAS BIRM—WAS—IS GOING OFF TO BIRMINGHAM, DID THAT SEEM A PARTICULARLY DANGEROUS TIME?

King: Birmingham was very difficult for many reasons from a personal standpoint. Basically, I was in a situation with four children, Martin was in jail. I did not even have regular household help. I had temporary volunteer help and four children and my husband in jail and it was, it was really a, a, a problem here in Atlanta, because in Montgomery I had, we had gone through a struggle together and, even though this was home, people didn't react the same way. It was—everybody was preoccupied with Montgomery. I mean, it was, it was a way of life. I mean for a whole year we boycotted more than a year, the buses, before the desegregation took place. So in, in Montgomery, here we were in a situation, soon after we arrived and there was not much help coming forth from people just—we had a volunteer church member to help. And that was difficult for me. The difficulty of understanding what was gonna happen. I knew that, I was prepared for it.

INTERVIEWER: THIS IS BIRMINGHAM? I'M SORRY, COULD YOU, COULD YOU FOCUS BACK TO—

King: I was prepared for Birmingham. I was prepared for that, because we had waited for the baby to come and so Mar—Martin could go to jail in Birmingham. Birmingham was the best planned campaign we had ever had and so it worked very well, cause it was planned quite well. Although the sit—situation in Birmingham and the segregation there was, was so intense. Martin felt that it was the most segregated city, second to Johannesburg, South Africa in the world. And he understood that it was gonna be—the opposition was gonna be tough there, but we were prepared for that. But he wanted to fill the jails and that's what happened. But what really bothered me, most, was when he went to jail on Good Friday. They did not allow him to make a phone call. And I always got a phone call from him once he went to jail. So I felt better hearing from him. Friday passed, Saturday, Sunday, no call. And that's when I called Wyatt Walker, on Easter Sunday, and asked him if he thought it would help if I made a statement to the press on the way they were being treated. They were being held incommunicado and that to say that I was concerned about his safety, because when you don't hear from people, you don't even know what's going on in jail. And Wyatt said, I don't—I think what you should do is to call the President. And I said, you think he'd talk to me? He said, of course, he'd have to. And so, I said, well, OK. I guess I'll do that, but I—but could you send a note in to Martin. See if you can get a note in and ask him, tell him what we're trying to do and get his, his opinion on it. Cause I wouldn't want to do anything

to interfere, you know. And he tried all day long and 'bout night he called and he said, they're not even letting the lawyers in now. And he said, you don't—I don't think you have any choice now, but to call. So I proceeded to call and finally, you know, I got no response, because I didn't know how to do it. Finally, I said to the operator, she kept saying we have no listing for the President, anyone in his family, not for the Vice President. And I said, there must be someone who can get me to the President. And she says, what about Pierre Salinger? And I said, oh sure. I don't know why I didn't think about that. And Pierre Salinger was right there on the phone when she called, placed the call. And he said, oh sure, Mrs. King, I'll tell the President. I said I wanted to see him. I wanted to talk to him, rather. Well, the President, didn't call right away, but Bobby Kennedy called, the Attorney General, that evening. And he wanted to know what he could do to help. And he complained about the situation in Birmingham and officials and how difficult it was, but it would be better after the election took place. But they were going to be sending the FBI in and that they would check on my husband and so on. Well, the next day about six o'clock, I got this call from President Kennedy. And when I got the call, of course, I did not realize he was on the phone, because the call was answered downstairs by my housekeeper, the person who was with me. It wasn't a housekeeper, because she wasn't regular, a regular person. It was my temporary help.

01:12:04:00

INTERVIEWER: ACTUALLY, MAYBE YOU SHOULD START THAT AGAIN. YOU GOT SIDETRACKED.

King: [coughs]

INTERVIEWER: YOU CAN JUST SAY THE CALL WAS ANSWERED DOWNSTAIRS.

King: Oh. And so, I got a call, and the call came in downstairs. And when I came onto the call the operator was saying, will you get your child off the phone, please. And so, little Dexter was there babbling away on the phone and I, I yelled down to say, get Dexter off the phone. And then this voice came on and I knew it was a familiar voice. And he said, Mrs. King I—how are you? I got your message and I understand you talked to my brother and he—did he explain to you we sent the FBI in last night to check on your husband and he, he is all right. I want you to know that, that we are doing everything we can and Dr. King is, is, is safe and, and if there's anything that I can do in the next few days to be of help feel free to call on me. You know how to get me, don't you? You get in touch with me or my brother or Pierre. You know how to get me don't you? And I said, yes, Mr. President. Thank you so much. He said, and by the way, your husband will be calling you very shortly. And it was such a relief. In about fifteen minutes Martin called. And, of course, he fasted when he went to jail and he was really had, you know, you could tell he was very kind of down with no energy. And when he spoke, of course, he was very glad to speak to me, but he didn't know why he was calling. And, of course, I tried to convey it to him without saying every word because we knew we were being wiretapped. And so he got—sent back to me to get the message through to Wyatt Walker and, you know, get the press, you know, we had to use the press to keep—get the word out. And Martin said after that they were, as a matter of fact, they had been sleeping on steel. They gave them mattresses and pillows and got them out for

exercise and showers and so forth. I mean, the treatment changed markedly. And it was because of that intervention. Well, you know, after that I felt much better and, of course, I was able to go and visit Martin that week and, and, of course, I felt better after I knew he was in communication that someone could reach him. As long as he was safe, I didn't worry about what he was doing, because I supported it and I believed. I knew it had to be done. And he very much wanted to do this. To identify with the life, the life of Christ. Going to jail on Good Friday. And, and it was a very, very emotional thing with the staff, I understand, when he was trying to make his decision. Because if he went to jail, broke the injunction, what would happen if the movement stopped or if it continued or how, you know. All that he had to make a decision on. He was trying to get Ralph to go with him. Ralph said, I need to be in my pulpit, Easter Sunday. You have Daddy King and you don't have to be there. And he said, Ralph, you've always been with me, but I'm going. And Ralph joined him.

01:15:11:00

INTERVIEWER: YEAH. HE WAS WONDERFUL IN OUR INTERVIEW WITH HIM. HE WAS QUITE WONDERFUL. LET ME JUMP TO SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS AT THE END OF THE, REALLY, AFTER THE CAMPAIGN WHICH IS THE, THE BOMBING OF THE SIXTEENTH STREET CHURCH. WHEN THE FOUR LITTLE GIRLS WERE KILLED. DO YOU REMEMBER YOUR REACTION TO THAT?

King: Well, I was shocked, really, because it was right after the March on Washington in 1963 which was such a great experience. It was a great moment of fulfillment when Martin gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. And we really felt this sense of progress. That people came together, black and white, even though the South was totally segregated, but here black and white people were there together. And we felt that, felt that sense of oneness. And we, we just, you know, had the feeling that, you know, the dream could be realized. And then a few weeks later this bombing in Birmingham with four innocent little girls. And then you realized how intense this whole feeling was and the opposition was. And that it would take a lot more than what was being done to change the situation. In a sense it was, it was just one of those things. What could you say? I mean, these are innocent children in a Sunday school. I mean, you know, the person—you think about the, the human being that did this. But, I think, it was those young girls were martyrs, were martyrs for the cause. And whenever you have martyrs it tends to—it advances the cause. I think that in Birmingham, in this Birmingham story and, and, and the achievement of the settlement that led to the Civil Rights Act, John F. Kennedy, too, became a martyr. Because in the fall, November, as a matter of fact, 22nd, he was assassinated in that same year. And with the four little girls and John F. Kennedy, President Johnson was able to get the Civil Rights Act passed, I think, in 1964, in July because it became a memorial to, to President Kennedy. I understand that was part of the technique that was used to get the bill through the Congress.

INTERVIEWER: STOP FOR A MOMENT.

[cut]

01:17:42:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 196]

INTERVIEWER: READY WHEN YOU ARE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: WE'LL TELL THE STORY UP TILL THAT POINT IF YOU, IF YOU'D LIKE TO JUST—

King: When I arrived at—in Selma and went to the church where the meeting was being held, it was a noontime mass meeting, Andy Young said to me, Malcolm X is here and he just made a speech and he has really aroused the people. And you're gonna have to speak, because you're gonna have to really talk about nonviolence and sort of invoke, you know, the whole nonviolent spirit, because the people now have been turned a different way. And I said, Andy, I don't feel like speaking. I really don't want to speak. He said, but you're gonna have to speak. And I was there to visit Martin, who was in jail, really. And so, he finally kept saying, well, you know, you really got to do it and I—we just need it. So I said, well, OK. For the cause, you know, I'll do it. Cause I wasn't that inspired myself. Well, you know, when you get into a situation with an audience and people who have that spirit, you know, you kind of get some spirit yourself. And as I was sitting on the platform, Malcolm X leaned over toward me, cause we sat next to each other and he said, Mrs. King, will you tell Dr. King that I'm sorry I won't get to see him. I had planned to visit him in jail, but I have to leave. I have to go out of the country to—I believe he said France or England to an all-Africa conference, but I want him to know, you tell him that, that, that, that I, I didn't come to make his job more difficult. I thought that if the white people understood what the alternative was that they would be willing to listen to Dr. King. Well, I didn't quite know how to take it because, prior to that, I had my own perception of Malcolm. And I, you know, I, I thought of him as being a really violent type person. I mean, you know, but he was so meek and he was, he was so different, you know, as most people are when you get to know them. When you confront them. And so, I said well, thank you very much. I'll be sure and tell him. And, of course, within a few weeks, Malcolm had been assassinated. And it made a tremendous impact on me, because I kept thinking what a, what a waste. He had, he had begun to turn around after having gone to Mecca and understanding what true Islam is.

01:20:43:00

INTERVIEWER: I'M GONNA MOVE YOU AHEAD, ALSO, NOW TO, TO THAT KEY SUNDAY, BLOODY SUNDAY, IN, IN SELMA. AND I'M WONDERING, HOW DID DR. KING REACT TO THE NEWS? HE WASN'T IN TOWN, BECAUSE HE WAS, HE

WAS IN ATLANTA DOING OTHER WORK, BUT WHAT WAS HIS REACTION TO THAT?

King: Well, whenever there was violence of any kind it was depressing to Martin. Because he understood the potential of, of, of destroying community, destroying life, and unnecessary life if it is not controlled and if it's not stopped, really. And what he wanted to do was to try to find a way to turn this into, to a nonviolent struggle. A struggle had to be, but it must be nonviolent. The violence came from the opposition. But when I talked to him that evening, and I was out in San Francisco when he, when he, when he called. I called him. And he seemed so depressed. I said to him, and I was trying to think of something to cheer him, that if you have all those people to come in, as he was mobilizing people to come in, I think, it was for Tuesday and this was Sunday night. Then you can, you know, write your own law, so to speak. There was an injunction against marching. The same kind of thing that had been tried in Birmingham and we had—the people already having been hurt and so on. And it was just dangerous to try to do this, unless we could get the federal, the National Guard federalized. And this is what he was asking the President to do. To federalize the National Guard. The troops were already there. And they were the Alabama National Guards. And what he wanted to do was to federalize them. And so, that's what he was hoping and asking for, but it was a very difficult time for him and for, for me too, because I felt torn. Since I wasn't, I wasn't in Atlanta and I wanted to rush back. I was out west trying to raise money through my Freedom Concerts, performances. And, and I said to Martin, I'll come back. He said, no, you don't need to come back. You stay, because you're making a contribution too. But I knew what I would do if anything happened. I was gonna take that first plane out, but fortunately, I didn't have to do that. But, but Selma was, in many ways very rewarding, but in many ways very frustrating too.

01:23:24:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT LET ME ASK YOU ABOUT ONE OF THE REWARDS OF IT, ALL RIGHT? ONE OF THE THINGS YOU MUST HAVE FELT GOOD ABOUT IS PRESIDENT JOHNSON CALLING FOR—

King: Oh, I did. When I, I was, I was alone in my bedroom when President Johnson gave that speech, the “We Shall Overcome” speech is what we call it. And I was talking to the television. I kept saying, they finally got the message. They finally got the message. And I was saying, oh, this is great. This is great. Then he would say, “We shall overcome and we shall overcome.” And I just, you know, I had nobody to talk to because I was alone. The kids was, I think, the kids might have been asleep, but, you know, here I was in my bedroom just feeling such great thrill, you know. To have the President, you know, saying these things which I thought the whole nation would somehow begin to feel and, I think, that did happen. That was a great moment for us.

01:24:28:00

INTERVIEWER: WE'VE HEARD, WE'VE HEARD A STORY THAT, THAT DR. KING'S REACTION WAS THAT HE CRIED. DO YOU, DO YOU KNOW WHETHER

THAT'S TRUE?

King: Well, I wasn't with him. So I really don't know. He was not in, in Atlanta, so I really, I really don't know. He could have. He cried occasionally. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: OF COURSE.

King: You know, you cry with, with moments of fulfillment and joy. And you cry, moments of sadness and sometimes you cry when you just, you know, have so much pressure and you've got to release it. You know?

01:24:59:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW LET ME, LET ME ASK YOU ABOUT ONE OF THE SAD MOMENTS, THEN, WHICH IS THE STEPS OF THE CAPITOL AFTER THAT FINAL MARCH AND AFTER THE DEATHS OF—AFTER THE DEATH OF JIMMIE LEE JACKSON, TOO. I MEAN HOW DID YOU FEEL? DID IT FEEL LIKE A TRIUMPH TO HAVE MADE IT THROUGH THIS MARCH OR DID IT, DID IT FEEL—DO WE HAVE A LOT OF TIME?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH.

INTERVIEWER: DID IT FEEL VERY, VERY SAD?

King: It was a great, *it was a great moment to go back to Montgomery. Because, you see, for us it was returning to Montgomery after ten years. And I kept thinking about ten years earlier, how we were visibly just blacks, and when you looked at that march, you had Catholic priests and nuns, and you had other clergy, and you had a lot of white people.* I mean, you know, *it was really a beautiful thing to pass Dexter Avenue and pass, and go toward the capitol marching together,* even though it was a dangerous march. I mean, we never, never felt that we were safe at any point. Even coming into Montgomery that day, into the city, because they had guard, national, federal guardsman on buildings and all around. And as we came through certain sections the staff people surrounded Martin and even held up their hands around his head to make sure that, if there was a, a bullet that, you know, it would be deflected. So, I mean, it was not easy and there were threats of—plots for his assassination all the way through that march. So you know, though when we got down to Dexter and going up toward the capitol, it was safer. And there was a great feeling of exhilaration when you looked back and saw, you know, what we thought was fifty thousand at least. A lot of entertainment personalities and so on. It, it was a, a great moment of fulfillment, having done that *and listening to Martin's speech,* that day. And he ended it with the "Glory, Hallelujah," which was, you know, used at the last speech he made. But he had asked me to write out the words to that, "Mine eyes have seen the glory," and certain verses that he didn't remember. And he ended his speech that day with that same, quoting that same song, "mine eyes have seen the glory of the battle—"

[sound roll out]

[cut]

01:27:26:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 197]

[change to sound roll 1148]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: IT'S FIRST STICKS, I'M SORRY.

INTERVIEWER: OH.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FIRST STICKS.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: ALL RIGHT.

INTERVIEWER: SO WHAT WOULD YOU SAY WERE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN THAT THAT TEN YEAR PERIOD AND WHAT WAS LEFT UNDONE?

King: I think the sense of dignity that black people had achieve and the feeling that they had now a place in our society and, and they could be represented, because they had not yet registered the large number of people, but at least we had the ballot had been achieved. Desegregation of public transportation, desegrega—desegregation of public accommodations, and, of course, we had, in a sense, we had desegregated the, the South in many in—essentially, in terms of the barriers, physically, that separated us. But the implementation of all of this had yet to be realized. The—there was also the lack of economic progress. I mean, with, with the barriers of segregation being eliminated, so to speak, legally, all the legal barriers were—had been eliminated, but there were these other barriers that would, would still keep people in a, in a form of, of oppression and to a disadvantage unless something took place there. So Martin knew that at some point he had to deal with that, but we were confronted with a war. The Vietnam War. So he had to deal with that issue. And he spoke out, of course, on the Vietnam War and then because of the reaction he sort of retreated a bit. Because people were not ready to continue to support him in that and support civil rights. But then, of course, in 1967 he began his campaign for economic justice and that is what he understood was the final and great challenge and that it would require much more from, from, from all of us. And he said, this is gonna be the most difficult aspect of our whole struggle.

01:30:01:00

INTERVIEWER: EXCUSE ME, THAT'S THE END OF OUR TIME PERIOD. I CAN'T, I CAN'T QUITE—I JUST WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT IF THERE'S ANYTHING FOR THE, FOR THE, THE PERIOD THAT ENDS IN '65 THAT WE SHOULD KNOW THAT YOU SHOULD HAVE A CHANCE TO SAY THAT.

King: Ok, you just want to keep it—

INTERVIEWER: BECAUSE WE—WE'RE—WE WON'T BE ABLE TO GO PAST '65 IN THIS PROGRAM. WE'RE GONNA—

King: You asked me what still needed to be achieved. So—

INTERVIEWER: THAT WAS—

King: —that was what I was trying to do.

INTERVIEWER: I SEE.

King: Now what, what, what do you want me to do?

INTERVIEWER: ANY, ANY OTHER ACCOMPLISHMENTS THAT YOU THINK WE SHOULD KNOW? ANYTHING ELSE? THE DIGNITY IS VERY IMPORTANT. DO YOU THINK—AND THE BREAKING OF THE BARRIERS. LET'S STOP FOR A MOMENT.

01:30:38:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: THIS WAS A PERIOD WHERE, WHERE—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FLAGS.

INTERVIEWER: —PEOPLE WERE REALLY—

01:30:40:00

[cut]

INTERVIEWER: —RAISING THEIR ASPIRATIONS—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —AND THEN THEY COULD MOVE FORWARD FROM THERE. I THINK THAT'S VERY IMPORTANT FOR US. PLEASE.

King: This was a period where the aspirations of those who'd been disadvantaged, black and poor people, had been raised. There was a lot of hope and there was a great feeling, now, that we have been able to make progress and change within a relatively short period of time. So much progress that we can, with hard work and determination, continue to move forward and, particularly, if we remain nonviolent, I think, that was what Martin kept saying. Use of the nonviolent strategy was a formula that would, would help us move, I think, on, on toward the realization of, of equality and, and equity.

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S A WONDERFUL ANSWER. THANK YOU. THANK YOU. THAT'S A WRAP.

[cut]

[end of interview]

01:31:43:00

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