Interview with **Leo Lillard**
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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 322]

[sound roll 1311]

Lillard: No problem.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: IT'S ALL YOURS.

00:00:12:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF AND HOW YOU GOT TO GET INVOLVED IN THE MOVEMENT LIKE THAT.

Lillard: Ok, well, first of all I came from a family that was pretty militant. My dad was the first black person to run for mayor in the town. My dad was the first person that basic, basically contended and fought against the urban renewal round the Capitol Hill area. He went, he went to a hearing one time well Mayor Ben West, the good mayor, was telling everybody that nobody's going to get hurt when this bulldozer comes through. And my daddy

organized Jewish people owned land downtown, white Caucasians, and, of course, black folks. And he got them to testify during the trial, during the hearing. And they all said how much they were gonna lose, how much the city was taking their property and gave them nothing. Then there wasn't, my dad didn't get anybody black to talk, so he said he had to get up, and he, he made a mockery out of Ben West's sort-of Ger- accent. He said that basically paraphrasing Ben West, is that nobody's gonna get hurt. And he says, "I can just imagine two hundred years ago when white folks came to Nashville, and that's what they told the Indians: 'Indians, just move your teepee just a little bit back and nobody's gonna get hurt.'" And he said, "of course, we all know the story." At the end of his testimony, his statement he got a standing ovation from black folks and white folks. And, of course, the bankers and the leading black leaders told him his life wasn't worth a penny. He told them he didn't want to live if he couldn't live with pride. And I recall-I was young when that happened, but I recall that it did happen-and I recall that-that-that my whole upbringing was always to deal with evil, always never shirk back, never to compromise. He told me a story about his grandfather who was buried alive as a slave on a plantation in Texas, and his grandmother told him this story–

00:02:02:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET ME CUT YOU FOR ONE SECOND, YEAH.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THANK YOU.

INTERVIEWER: WHEN YOU'RE-YEAH–

Lillard: My Pops, my father once–

CAMERA CREW MEMBER ONE: YOU READY?

INTERVIEWER: MMM-HMM, YEAH, MMM-HMM–

Lillard: –told a story–

INTERVIEWER: START AGAIN.

Lillard: Mmmm, my father once told me a story when I was young why he was so militant, why he was so angry, why there was so much fire in him. And his, the story goes that his grandfather was buried alive whe-, when he was, I mean he was a young man, thirty, thirty-

four years old, as a slave, by the slave owners. What had happened apparently, according to the story that he was told by his grandmother, that the master tried to accost, or to assault my grandfather's wife. And my grandfather, of course, beat the master up, maimed him, practically killed him. And the way the story goes is they kept it quiet for two or three weeks, and one Sunday, one bright Sunday afternoon they gathered all the slaves from as many plantations as they could find, and they dug a hole, and they buried my grandfather alive. And from that day my grandmother always taught all, all the men on the plantation that you must tell this story to your kids so you will understand the nature of plantations, you will understand the nature of Caucasian thinking. And he told me that story at a very early age, he said, "This, this is what will happen to you if you dare to fight back, he said never, never doubt that it won't happen." I guess then from a child I've always known that that is definitely a real possibility. But the other possibility is living like a robot, other possibility is living and, and kneeling, and I refuse to kneel, I've always thought that people who kneel are just are not full human beings.

00:03:55:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, TALK TO ME ABOUT–

Lillard: Oops.

Interviewer: DO YOU WANT TO CUT? OK, LET'S CUT,

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YES.

INTERVIEWER: LET'S-OK

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: YOU WANT TO, HOW DO YOU WANT TO–

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

00:04:04:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, TELL ME, DESCRIBE THE NASHVILLE THAT YOU–

Lillard: ***When I was a boy, of course, Nashville was clearly two, a divided town. We were very much aware of that, and yet on the other hand, we really*** didn't, di-, ***didn't care. We were very much contained, we knew our culture, we knew what we were about. But it was clear that when I was very young, that I had some problems asking my mother questions about why that was. I knew that it was, but I was always curious to why it was. And one***

day we were at Kress, and Kress had these beautiful marble fountains, water fountains, and one was, one was, said, one said "Colored" and one said "White." And being the kind of kid I was I went over to both fountains and tasted the water and told my mother, "Tastes the same to me, Mom." Said, she said, "Boy, come on here." Said, I said, "Mother, what's the reason? Why are there two names up there and the water is exactly the same, Mom." She said, "Boy, come on here, we ain't got time t-, t-, to fool around with that kind of mess." And I always thought, you know, that, that there was a, there was a, there was something in the back of her head that she wasn't giving me. And, of course, as I grew, I grew older had an incident on the bus in Nashville, Tennessee. The buses of course were segregated, the white folks sat in the front, and back folks sat in the black [sic], black folks sat in the back in Nashville. And, one day I was riding the bus and I decided I was going to sit on the bus for the last three blocks of the ride. And it was a Twelfth Avenue bus, full of black folks and not nobody in the front of the bus, seats empty. I decided I want to sit on the, up front of the bus, at least the last three blocks of this trip. So I did. Got on the front of the bus, I walked up to the front, and of course the bus driver looked in the mirror, you know, he said obviously he had to d-do something. S-so he, luckily I rode two blocks before he did anything. At the third, before he got to the third block he was just sensing I was gonna get off at the third block. He stopped, and he told me I had to move, I'd have to go back with the rest of the, whatever he said, you know. And I said "No, I ain't going nowhere." And he came up, and he said "Now I'm going to give you two more chances to go back," and I said, "No, I ain't going nowhere." So he grabbed me by the collar, as they always did, drug me up the aisle, and threw me, tried to, I think he tried to throw me down the steps, but I held to the, to the bar cause I wanted to look back at the faces of black folks who were sitting there, and I don't know why I did that. I wanted to look back and see what they were, what was on their minds. And the, and the look I saw in their eyes I'd never forget as long as I live. Didn't, didn't one person move, di-didn't one person mutter a word. They looked at me as if I was holding 'em up from getting home, ashamed of black f-folks, y'know, you know, as a, as a, as a people, and I was, ju-, ju-, just utterly clowning. And I'll never forget the looks on those faces. So I got thrown off the bus finally, he took my hand and threw me off the bus, and I said, well something has got to change in Nashville, there's no reason for those fountains to be there, there's no reason for empty seats to be here, and no adult can tell me why, no adult can actually explain to me why it is that way, satisfactorily. They could tell me all other things, I couldn't figure out why they couldn't tell me that.

00:07:04:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, THEN TELL ME WHY, GET ME BACK TO, UP TO THE TIME WHEN YOU GOT INTO THE MOVEMENT. WHY DID YOU THEN GET INTO IT AS A COLLEGE STUDENT?

[wild audio]

Lillard: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OH, HANG ON, I'M SORRY, WE'RE JUST ABOUT TO ROLL OUT, SO–

INTERVIEWER: OK, YOU'RE YOU KNOW, YOU'RE IN SCHOOL NOW–

CAMERA CREW: IS THAT A CUT? THAT'S A CUT, YEAH.

INTERVIEWER: YOU'RE, YOU'RE THINKING–

[cut]

[slate]

[change camera roll to 322]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND–

[sync tone]

00:07:30:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, NOW THE FIRST SIT-IN HAS STARTED, AND, WHAT, TELL ME HOW YOU GOT INVOLVED, I MEAN, WHAT GOT YOU THERE?

Lillard: OK. For some reason I know that the, the people who were, who were organizing the sit-ins were from out of town. But because Kelly Miller Smith was involved who was the pastor of the church I attended, some kind of way I, I can't remember if I was part of a first, the first organizing–

INTERVIEWER: PLEASE START AGAIN.

Lillard: OK.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU CUT FOR, FOR A SECOND?

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: I THINK WHAT I'M TRYING TO GET TO HERE, MAYBE I'M A LITTLE VAGUE, IS I'M THINKING THAT–

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THANK YOU. AND ROLL.

00:08:14:00

Lillard: OK, the peop-, Diane Nash and John Jim Bevel and John Lewis, and even Jim Lawson, all the intellectuals or people who put the sit-ins together were from out of town. And, I had, I had, I had felt once we got rolling, once the sit-ins started, and we were, the students were definitely in charge of it, it was sort of my, my chance, it was my chance to get back at Nashville, it was my chance to not have any adult lie to me about what, what the problem was, it was my chance to make the problem different, to correct it. It was clear that being a Nashvillian, or growing up here, born and bred here, I had clear obligations, clear reasons to put my body on the line, continuously put my mind on the line. It appeared to me that if I was going to pursue an engineering career in Nashville, a, to pursue a degree at T.S.U., then it was also equally important to spend as much time as I could involved with the Movement in Nashville, it was, it was basically our Movement, it was a city movement, even though students from out of town started it. And it was clear that, that the people who were, who were, who were g-going to be the leaders of Nashville had to be born and bred here, people who were going to take over the reigns after the students left, and they would surely leave, had to come from Nashville, and I felt that that's, that that's where I belonged.

00:09:35:00

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE'RE STILL ROLLING.

INTERVIEWER: SO, OK, WHEN DID WHAT GOT THE ADULTS, THE ADULTS INVOLVED IN IT, WHAT GOT THEM GOING? IS EVERYTHING OK?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: YEAH OK GOOD.

INTERVIEWER: GO.

Lillard: Most of the people who were on the line were, w-w-were young, they were nineteen, twenty, twenty-one and down. Some high school students were there usually we had one or two until, or, or several. It was clear that we had little to lose, we had no jobs to lose, we had no houses to lose, we had no churches to lose we had no cars to lose. And of course in those days credit and the ability to buy, to buy things was just b-becoming accessible to some black folks. And, and there was, it was these, a lot of black folks treasure those things. And we knew that the adults were not going to get that much involved, so we had to do things and escalate the whole conflict to the point where they had no choice. And, of course, sometimes things were beyond your control the racist pig that bl-, that bl-, blew up Looby's house basically w-worked right into our plan, cause what that did was that sort of was the s-straw that broke the camel's back. The adults could no longer say it's just those rowdy out-of-town students raising hell downtown, not when we got one of our own, one of our pride and joy, Z. Alexander Looby, you know, at the coun—the first black councilman from Nashville, a-a-a-a a lawyer par excellence, how could you sit back now as an adult and do nothing? And what it did it also created a clear competition among churches, black churches in town, and some

white churches to, t-to see, to show that they were involved, they were on the right side of the issue. And it clearly gave them n-n-no choice, they became locked in, even when they'd never put their bodies on the line they were clearly identified, clearly had to, had to be on the, on the, on the proper side.

00:11:26:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, GOOD. CUT FOR A SECOND.

[cut]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK, THE BOYCOTT, TELL ME HOW EFFECTIVE THE BOYCOTT WAS AND WHAT DID IT DO FOR THE MOVEMENT IN NASHVILLE? OK, TELL ME ABOUT THE BOYCOTT AND HOW EFFECTIVE THE BOYCOTT WAS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: HOLD ON LET'S CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: CUT PLEASE.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ALL YOURS.

00:11:46:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, TELL ME ABOUT THE BOYCUT AND HOW EFFECTIVE THE BOYCOTT WAS.

Lillard: Let me just say that, that once the Movement started, a creativity came from everywhere. People began to look at what kind of tactics would work in pacific [sic] places. There was no, no, no models to use, you couldn't go to a handbook and say how do you demonstrate? How do you attack this, this problem? So I think people began to put in, input concepts, input strategies, input tactics, and ***someone developed the idea of let's stop spending money downtown. And basically it was sort of like the Montgomery bus boycott. Let's stop supporting the system we're trying to change. The bus, the, the boycott in Nashville primarily focused on the Nashville downtown stores, the Nashville retail merchants. We figured that if they would feel the pinch of not having shoppers buy in the stores downtown Nashville then that would put pressure on the Mayor, on the political fabric of town, of Nashville to change the, the rules, the regulations.*** So we decided we would look at Easter, Easter being a major time in Nashville, in any city, when folks go out

and buy a lot of clothing, a lot of retail goods. We decided that would be an ideal time, since Nashville at this point was not totally involved, the adults, all the community. It wasn't, it was no longer students, we were on the vanguard but it was clear tha-, that the town had declared war on racism and we had all the troops, every little nook and cranny in Nashville. ***The boycott was then the perfect time to say, stay out of town. And Nashville as a whole, black and white, did stay out of town because the white folks didn't go downtown because of the potential violence, the riot, the riots as they saw it. The black folks, although there were some black folks who went to downtown to try and break the boycott, and we had to send some education committees downtown to convince them that that was not the thing to do. And we didn't hurt them, but we did kind of snatch their bags and tear things away from them, from their arms and let them fall on the ground, and say stay out of town. And of course that, the word got around pretty quick you don't go downtown anymore.*** What that then, then did is that that clearly sent a message that there was no longer just students, there was no longer just out-of-town– rebel row–

00:14:13:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: QUIET BACK THERE PLEASE, I CAN HEAR EVERYTHING BACK THERE.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TURN THAT TV DOWN PLEASE. OK, WHAT WE'RE GOING TO DO IS WE'RE GOING TO TALK ABOUT THE MARCH. AND GIVE ME AN IDEA OF WHAT, OF THAT MARCH COMING TOGETHER AND WHAT IT MEANT.

Lillard: The morning that Looby's house was bombed it was clear that the racists in the town were out to get a symbol of the movement. They couldn't get a student because they had already beaten us up, that wouldn't work, so they decided to attack an adult symbol and what this did unknowingly, unwittingly, it worked into, into the, to the benefit of the movement because once you attack Looby, a pillar of the community, a councilman a professional adult. What that did was that then sent a signal to Nashville as a whole that no longer is it just going to be a student only movement. That the adults, the professors, the workers the teachers all the spectrum of Nashville had to make some physical presence shown on that march. Now the march itself, of course, was something that was put together instantaneously. We had many spontaneous events to take place, but I think the march itself following Looby's house bombing was, was very gratifying because not only was it spontaneous, but it had quantity for, for a change. Often times, we would have to cajole people to come down convince them, but in this case the march didn't need that, the march sent a signal. We must all put our bodies on the line-it's no longer just a student-it's no longer just an out of town set of, set of intellectuals where they belongs to everybody, everybody has no choice at this point. We've got to come downtown and yet it did still, it was orderly, it was silent, it was well put

together there was no–

[wild audio]

Lillard: –altercations, no incidents, nobody got run over by cars and we went to the place where we knew we had to be. We had to be at at the seat of the government; we had to take over the government; we had to demand the government come and address us and that's exactly what happened.

00:16:32:00

INTERVIEWER: DESCRIBE-YOU'RE THERE, IT'S, IT'S, YOU'RE TWENTY YEARS OLD AT THAT TIME, YOU'RE THERE AT THE MARCH IN YOUR BEST RECOLLECTION, DESCRIBE THAT DAY, DESCRIBE THE MARCH, DESCRIBE THE FEELING, DESCRIBE WHAT YOU, WHAT YOU EXPERIENCED THAT DAY.

Lillard: First of all, it was a, it was a golden, crisp day, it was a beautiful day in the spring. Just a kind of ideal day for a student you know, to do anything other than go to class, but besides that it was the kind of day where, where we felt that the found—a major blow had been dealt for our cause. We knew at this point with the numbers for the first time, we had numbers, we had a spectrum, we knew that, that once the Mayor came out of his little hiding place he had nowhere to run. He had to come out and face, face the music, so to speak. And we knew that once we left there, Nashville would never be the same. In terms of the fact that that here for the first time we have a major body of black folks and white folks saying: Come out and face the music, come out and, and deal with the fact that we are not going away, the movement is not going away, things have got to change or we'll probably come back everyday.

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S A CUT.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: ON CAMERA ROLL 324 WE HAVE 20 FEET REMAINING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

00:18:05:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, TALK TO ME ABOUT NON-VIOLENCE AND–

Lillard: And you know it's strange that I, at, at that point, when I was at, at, in the movement

in Nashville I was a, a junior in college. I had just finished two years of ROTC, which was required in those days. And of course, my whole concept of life was not as, as, as exactly as intellectual and high-brow as, as many of the people like, like John Lewis and Jim Lawson and Diane Nash. Their, they were beginning to develop the tactic of the movement as a way of life and even though I trained people how to protect themselves, it was simply nothing more than a tactic to me and it, it, it was a, it was a way to go to a demonstration, it was a way to avoid getting injured, it was a way to come back and be able to deal with–

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: CUT. I'M SORRY. I'M SORRY, I CAN'T USE THIS UNLESS YOU TELL ME WHAT "IT" IS. YOU NEVER TOLD "NON-VIOLENCE".

Lillard. Non-violence. OK.

INTERVIEWER: I LIKE WHAT YOU'RE SAYING WITH NON-VIOLENCE. LET'S START AGAIN.

Lillard: OK.

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU CUT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: YEAH I DID.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND–

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: –MARK.

[sync tone]

Lillard: OK, non-violence.

00:19:11:00

INTERVIEWER: YES, I WANT YOU TO GIVE ME NON-VIOLENCE, YOU GOTTA GIVE ME, I GOTTA KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT THOUGH, OK?

Lillard: OK. The movement in Nashville as, as a movement throughout the South had adopted a, a non-violent stance that was a tactic, that was a, that was the logo, so to speak of, of, of the movement we would not fight back, we would not return violence of hoodlums, we would not retaliate. And the concept in itself, was simply to me and to many folks like myself, simply no more than a tactic. Non-violence was a way that the movement could take

on a semblance of respectability. It was it was it was a tactic so the media could not call us hoodlums. It was a tactic, so that the international community could not condemn us as, as, as, as evil doers. We were students; we were peaceful; we were saying things must change, and we were doing it in a way that would not jeopardize the safety of many of the people who might come down and, to a demonstration. If we were violent, it probably would have immediately eliminated many people who would not participate. So as a tactic, it was, it was, it was, it was successful. Myself, personally I saw it only limited as a tactic. I was a part of ROTC at TSU. I was very much a scientist involved with many military ideas, it was, it was clear that non-violence was a, was a way for us to express ourselves, it was a way to catapult, to project the movement. To Diane Nash and Jim Lawson it was, it was much deeper. They had spent many hours, many years probably into research as to why this particular way of doing things was, was germane to their everyday existence. It was not germane to my existence. It was simply a way for us to, to deal with an evil system and to correct it, and many times I would use my city friends to protect us from the hoodlums. Prior to the hoodlums getting to us, some of the city guys I grew up with in high school had already gotten to them. And that was very important sometimes because otherwise, we may have not have been able to sustain the movement, we may have not been able to sustain that particular action for that day, so, nonviolence had had a very limited concept in, in my way of thinking. It was, it worked but it had a very limited set of, scope of application.

00:21:53:00

INTERVIEWER: CUT.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK, SPEAK TO ME ABOUT NASHVILLE AND THE CHEMISTRY AND WHY, BECAUSE OF THAT CHEMISTRY AND BECAUSE OF NASHVILLE YOU WERE AB—YOU WERE ABLE TO GO OUT AND BECOME PARTS OF, OF THE MOVEMENT THROUGHOUT THE NATION.

Lillard: On February 13, 1960, Nashville had it's first sit-in and we were basically, I think a week or two behind Greensboro, North Carolina, so we, while we don't claim the, the having the first sit-in, it's clear that Greensboro did not have the chemistry that Nashville had. It had A&T University and Bennett College, but for some reason, we had a clear spectrum of, of people here that has never been duplicated not even in Nashville since then. We were the kind of cadre, the kind of fellowship, the kind of, coalition that had every avenue covered, every square was covered by somebody's skill, by somebody's abilities, by somebody's nat-natural talent, by somebody's learned research. So that when we started, the movement in Nashville, unlike other places, it was clear we were destined to be the first city to break the,

the lunch counters, we were destined to, to, to generate the John Lewises and the, Jim Bevels, we were destined to create the underpinning for SNCC, we were destined to be the place where Stokely Carmichael would come to, to taste the South. It was clear that all that would happen and it was clear to people outside of Nashville - Rockhill South Carolina invited us to come, invited all students to come, we showed up - only Nashville. Thayette County in this state was a place where we had–

[wild audio]

Lillard: –to basically conduct a Berlin Airlift so that those folks would survive the winter when they were thrown off their sharecropping farms. Taylor, Illinois–

00:23:50:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLLOUT.

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 325]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

00:23:57:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: QUIET PLEASE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: QUIET PLEASE.

INTERVIEWER: OK TALK TO ME ABOUT THAT, THAT SENSE OF CHEMISTRY AND DESTINY AND BOLDNESS THAT WAS IN NASHVILLE.

Lillard: I guess, I guess when you when we, when I think back, at, at here we had a few people some from out of town, some in town, students who had come to Nashville for some different reasons, some had come to go to school, some had come to teach, some had come to be ministers, and yet, they had all agreed that what they had come for was a secondary priority, and that their first priority at this point, had become you know, a cause celebre, we were, we were going to make this town, we were going to make this date, we were going to make this demonstration a monument to history. We were going to make the annals of history. We were going to change abruptly 3 or 400 years of habit. We were going to make a statement that was going to be carved in granite immediately-once and for all. And yet, and

yet, we knew that that we had no reason to believe that it would not succeed. And yet there were the odds against us were phenomenal odds. How could 25 individuals in a town they'd never been to before, never been part of an organization, never been elected any positions, come to a town and never been to before and change history? You know those meetings, those glances, those handshakes or smiles that we had and the, and the goof offing and then the serious kind, of kind of thinking were, were all occurring in an environment of certainty and we don't know what that certainty was. We knew that there had to be a reason for, for us being here in Nashville. There was a destiny, there was a, there was this, formula that said we are here, we have to make a statement, we have to act today, we have to act right now, we have to, we have to use the, the meager resources we have against a major evil, against a major enemy and to defeat him because that is your purpose. That's why you're here, forget the school, you're here to change Nashville-forget your, your lesson plan, you're here to change Nashville, and when you change Nashville, you'll change the world. And that's exactly what happened. From Nashville came SNCC, from Nashville came all of the basis for how you deal and confront and change things that are, are wrong in, in eyes of, of our, humanity.

INTERVIEWER: THANKS.

[cut]

[end interview]

00:26:50:00