

Interview with **Ralph Abernathy**

Date: October 22, 1988

Interviewer: Paul Stekler

Camera Rolls: 4016-4019

Sound Rolls: 405-406

Team: D

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

**Preferred Citation**

Interview with Ralph Abernathy, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 22, 1988 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #4016]

[sound roll #405]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Roll 4016. Time code starts at 1416.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:00:22:00

Interviewer:

OK. We were talking about the organizing for the Poor People's Campaign, especially in the southern states. Can you describe what it was like organizing the campaign...an-any stories you might remember?

00:00:32:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Well, we did a great deal of planning and work while organizing for the Pe—Poor People's campaign. We used cars, we used small chartered airplanes, and we went to, all over the state of Mississippi, and Alabama. And where poor people lived, trying to organize and get them aroused. The southern leg was to go to Washington in large, large numbers. And when Dr. King and I was devoted to this whole idea and we wanted to personally contact as many people, and we'd travel, and ate from grocery stores, from general stores, and traveled on the backwood roads.

00:01:47:00

Interviewer:

Would you go to a lot of towns per day? Do you remember that at all?

00:01:51:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Yes, I remember it so very well. We went to a lot of towns in the course of the day. We would make at least ten or fifteen towns in one particular day. I remember so very well and so vividly, once we had to go to Tuscaloosa, Alabama and we discovered that the lights were not on in this small town. And so consequently, we had to go on all the way to Birmingham rather than stop at Tuscaloosa because there were no lights and we had no way of landing without lights.

00:02:49:00

Interviewer:

And how were you traveling from these towns?

00:02:51:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

We were traveling by, cars and we were traveling by, small planes, chartered small planes.

00:03:06:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop it for a sec, OK?

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:03:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. Go.

00:03:15:00

Interviewer:

During the travels to organize the campaign, do you remember what happened in Marks?

00:03:21:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Yes. In Marks, Mississippi? Yes, I well remember. We visited a daycare center and Dr. King was moved to tears there. There was one apple and they took that, this apple and cut it into four pieces for four hungry waiting students. And when Dr. King saw that and that is all that they had for lunch, he actually ended up crying. The tears came streaming down his cheek and he had to leave the room.

00:04:20:00

Interviewer:

I want to bring you back a little bit, back in time, early in 1967. Dr. King had taken a stand against the war in Vietnam and there was a lot of national response. What was the shape of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference after that? Was there a clear direction as to where you were going?

00:04:47:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Yes. After Dr. King made the speech in New York at Riverside Church and came out against the war in Vietnam, we were very, very clear as to our direction that we were going here at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in, in its national office. We knew that Dr. King had ventured into international territory and had come out against the war in Vietnam. And, but we still had to win the battle against segregation and discrimination here at

home. And we could talk about Vietnam many, many, many miles away, but our foremost and primary concern was to win the right to vote, to eliminate poverty and injustice in all forms right here in the United States of America. And we would address two issues at the national level and at the international level.

00:06:25:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's stop for one second because I wanna—that was good.

[cut]

00:06:30:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:06:33:00

OK. I wanna go back to the march in support of the sanitation, strikers in Memphis. You and Dr. King get to Memphis and I believe you may been running behind schedule. Start me from that and go into the march. Describe your arrival, what you saw, what you felt, and what happened.

00:06:53:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Yes, I remember so very, very clearly that in the latter days of March, Dr. King and I were campaigning on behalf of the Poor People's Campaign in the state of New York and New Jersey. And he wanted to stay up there, because he had some appointments that he wanted to fulfill and, in New Jersey. And so he turned to me and said, Ralph, I want you to go to Memphis this evening. Because all of the national leaders, Roy Wilkins and the head of the Urban League and other, other persons had been into Memphis in support of the, the sanitation workers' strike. And he was scheduled to be there this, that particular evening. And I, naturally I was enjoying the reception that we had received there in New York and New Jersey and I didn't want to go. And he said, Ralph, you have to go, and, because I have to be over in Patterson, New Jersey, and they want me over there and you go down and speak for me. And so I agreed and I flew down to Memphis. And Reverend Solomon Jones met me and took me to the mass meeting which was held in the Mason Temple Church. This was the headquarters church for the Church of God in Christ and it was a full church. And that church hold about ten or twelve thousand people. And, and we just had a great time that evening

and I, I delivered one of mo—my most powerful speeches. And, and, I was taken to the Peabody Hotel, the only hotel that was unionized in Memphis. And that, I had never stayed in that hotel before because it was formerly for whites only. But I went to, I was taken there and I spent the night there.

00:10:12:00

Interviewer:

And the next day was the day that the, Dr. King came into town for the march?

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

That's the next day. Dr. King came—

Interviewer:

And what happened?

00:10:22:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

—into town for the march. And the Invaders, a, a black group called the Invaders would not let Dr. King get out of the car. First, I had gone to the airport to meet Dr. King and Bernard Lee and, so, we could not get him from the car. And finally, Jim Lawson, Reverend Jim Lawson decided that the best thing to do was to get started moving and

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

—we would not workshop the people. And so—

00:11:18:00

Interviewer:

Just, we just ran out of film, we have to do some switching.

Camera Crew Member #1:

That's a rollout on camera roll 4016.

[cut]

[camera roll #4017]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Fourteen-seventeen.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:11:26:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

00:11:28:00

Interviewer:

OK. There you are, the march has turned violent, the police are putting on their gas masks, and they're about to let one last car in. What do you do at that moment?

00:11:40:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

At that moment, Bernard Scott Lee, who was Dr. King's traveling assistant, stopped the car and asked the young lady if he could use this car to get Dr. Abernathy and Dr. King out of this situation. And, and the young lady agreed, and she s—got over, and Bernard Lee became our driver. And we were taken down to the river, the Mississippi River. And, and we stopped the p—motorcycle policemen at that point and asked them if we could use their service to get Dr. King out of the area. And he said, Where do you want to go? And I said the Peabody Hotel and he said, We cannot go to the Peabody Hotel because there's nothing but violence over there. And he said, Well, what about the, the Lorraine Motel? And the policeman said, We cannot go to the Lorraine Motel because there's nothing but violence over there and tear gas is everywhere. And he said, Well, I will take you to a place. And undoubtedly they had radioed ahead because they, he took us to the Headquarters Hotel of the Holiday Inn and it is on the banks of the Mississippi River. And it's a plush hotel. And they already had waiting for us a suite that had a living area and two bedrooms. And one was for Dr. King and one was for Bernard Lee and myself.

00:14:12:00

Interviewer:

Now, I've read that, that once you got up there, Dr. King got into bed and there were a lot of people that came to visit. And that his mood, maybe later on in the night after people left, was pretty extreme, and that you had a long conversation. He was talking about what he was feeling. How was he feeling and what, how did he express it to you?

00:14:32:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Well, there were not so many visitors permitted to come that evening because there was a curfew in the city. And this was the first time that violence had broken out on a march led by Dr. King. Even though, technically, Jim Lawson had called the march off. But the young man from the Invaders were, was killed that evening. And so there was a lot of tension in the air and Dr. King was heartbroken because he didn't want to lead a violent march, he wanted his record to be clear. And he said to me, Ralph, why don't we just step aside and let the violent forces run their course? Because they will soon run out. And I said to him, No, Martin, we will remain non-violent and we will be actively engaged in non-violent activities because violence is not the way. We cannot ever be free with, violence. And because violence destroys the hated as well as those who are against evil in this nation. And I, I, I prevailed with him but I didn't satisfy him. And he called New York and California and he just was most upset until the wee hours of the morning and he finally fall, fell asleep, and, and, it was not very long thereafter that the Invaders came and asked to speak to Dr. King.

00:17:02:00

Interviewer:

Let's go back for one second. I've read someplace that you've talked about his depression that night. How would you describe it that night? Just in a sentence.

00:17:10:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Well, it was more painful than I had ever experienced, I had ever seen Dr. King in so much misery. Never had I seen him so upset and disturbed.

00:17:32:00

Interviewer:

Let's go to the next day in the press conference. What was he trying to accomplish as he walked into that press conference? Did he talk to you about what he needed to do?

00:17:43:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Well, he didn't talk to me about it. He insisted that I hear the message of the Invaders and hear their confession. And he took over the press conference and said, I am gonna conduct this press conference on the record, or, or, or off the record. You can ask any question you want to ask of me, but, I want to clear the air. And they had a good press conference and he was a giant of a person. And when we were back upstairs, I just had to hug him and said, Martin, you were so gigantic, you were so wonderful, you was, you were so great. And he said, If I was great, will you please get me out of Memphis?

00:19:02:00

Interviewer:

Let me ask you about the mountaintop speech. You fly back into, to Memphis, you go to the Lorraine Motel, but Dr. King sends you by yourself to the Mason Temple. How did you get to be sent by yourself and then how did he end up coming to give his speech?

00:19:21:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

***Well, there was a tornado warning in Memphis that evening and it was raining, raining, and wind were blowing everywhere. I believe a little tornado came to Memphis also. And he knew that there would not be a big crowd and he said to me in the meeting with the staff, Ralph, I want you to go and speak this evening at the mass meeting.*** He had become so accustomed to large crowds and, and I said, Oh, no, don't send me. Send Jesse or Andy or one of the other fellows. And he said, Ralph, there is only person in the world that can speak for me and that is Ralph David Abernathy. Will you go? And I said, Yes, you know I will go. And, and so I went. And I saw only about three hundred people. As many photographers, more photographers than almost people in the church. And that, that is the same church that holds about ten or twelve thousand people. And so when I got in and was seated, I knew that those photographers and those cameramen were looking for Dr. King and it was not meant for me. And so I asked, Where is the nearest telephone? And I decided that I would go find that telephone and call for Dr. King. And Dr. King, he said, OK, Ralph, I will be right there. And I, I made a second pitch, I said, Martin, you know I would not ask you to come ordinarily, but these people want to hear you and they want to see you. And he said, David, that is not important. I will be there. And I, have I ever told you that I would do anything that I did not do? And I will be there as soon as the car can bring me over. And when he got over there to the church, in fifteen minutes, the camera, the cameramen, cameramen were glad to see him, and the people were glad to see him, and the presiding officer tells, says to me—



[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

—Which one of you want to be first tonight? And I said, I want to be first. And when got up to speak, I saw it, I said, I want to introduce our leader tonight. For too often the leader is taken for granted and I took him from his birthplace here in Atlanta on Auburn Avenue to Memphis, Tennessee. I didn't know then that he was making his last speech.

00:23:12:00

Interviewer:

Why don't we stop it there for a second? Switch camera.

[cut]

[camera roll #4018]

[sound roll #406]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll 4018. Time code 1418. Sound 406.

00:23:21:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:23:24:00

Interviewer:

OK. We were talking about that night. You've introduced him and then Dr. King gives a speech. And it builds and it builds and it builds and it finally finishes. What did you see when he turned around at the end of the speech?

00:23:42:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Well, I saw a, a great deal of enthusiasm over the fact that we were going on and we were not gonna let anybody stop us. And I don't think the people really felt that he felt that he was going to be assassinated at that particular time and—

00:24:20:00

Interviewer:

How did he look? What was his mood as he turned around?

00:24:23:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

As he turned around he was...as he always did, he was looking s-sad and burdened and troubled. But he looked as though he had accomplished a goal, fulfilled a goal, preached a wonderful sermon, gave a wonderful message, and he...I could see satisfaction on his brow and I could see sadness and, and grief. Just a, a typical freedom rally experience.

00:25:23:00

Interviewer:

Now, late that night, he stayed up pretty late and the next day started, one second. [siren]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[cut]

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

I didn't hear it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:25:37:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

00:25:38:00

Interviewer:

The next day, the last day, what were you doing at the Lorraine Motel? How did he spend his day?

00:25:48:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

We got up and once we were dressed and we went to a meeting of the staff. And we, they came to our room for the meeting. And we talked about going to Washington for the Poor People's Campaign, when we would leave. And, and we finally ordered lunch while we were still in the meeting. He didn't eat breakfast and I didn't eat breakfast, but we were always ready to eat lunch. And so he placed his order and somebody was kind enough to place my order, an order of catfish, and he had ordered catfish. And we were continuing the meeting. And finally, the young lady never got my order right and they brought two orders of catfish on the same plate. And we, he, they brought two separate orders of salad and he said, Ralph, don't worry the lady because we can eat from the same plate. And he ate some of my salad and he ate from his salad and we ate catfish from the same plate. And finally, we dismissed the meeting because the hearings were being held on the injunction.

00:28:37:00

Interviewer:

Why don't we stop there for a second, why don't we stop for a second.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:28:46:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, go.

00:28:48:00

Interviewer:

OK, we're in the last moments past five o'clock and Dr. King walks out to the balcony, you're in the room. Describe what happens.

00:28:57:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Well, we were in conversation. I was standing in the room putting on some Aramis after shave lotion or cologne. And he had told me that, Ralph, I want you to go with me. I would not go to Washington without you. And I want you to tell West Hunter Street Baptist Church that they have a revival that is greater than a natural and normal revival because we have to revive the soul of the nation. And he was saying to Jesse Jackson, Be sure, Jesse, to get Ben Branch to play my favorite song. I wanted to hear it this evening, 'Precious Lord, Take My Hand.' And Jesse Jackson said he would do that. And then Reverend Jones, the driver, said, Dr. King, you should wear your coat this evening, and he said, OK, I will get the coat. And I heard what sounded like a firecracker and I jumped. And when I jumped, I saw only his feet laying on the balcony. And I immediately rushed to his side and I started patting his cheek, saying, Martin, Martin, Martin. Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. This is Ralph. This is Ralph. This is Ralph. And I got his attention and he calmed down. His eyes were moving and, and he became very, very calm. And finally Andrew Young came up the steps and said, Oh, God. Oh, God, Ralph. It is over. And I became angry with Andrew Young and said, Don't you say that, An-Andy. Don't you say that. It is not over. And Billy Kyle, whom we were going to eat with, came up and I said, Billy get me an ambulance. And I heard nothing but a loud cry from our room and I said, Billy, keep yourself together. I want an ambulance. And he said, Ralph, all of the lines are busy. All of the lines are busy. But the FBI did call the ambulance. And I went with him, rode with him in the back of the ambulance. And I committed civil disobedience and I would not leave the operating room. And finally, the doctor came over to me and said, You are Dr. Abernathy and he will not survive. It would be an act of mercy because he would be paralyzed from his waist down and you may have your last moments with him. And I went over and took him in my arms and he breathed his last breath.

00:33:52:00

Interviewer:

Can you do me a favor and go back?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Let's change rolls.

Interviewer:

Change rolls?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes.

[cut]

[camera roll #4019]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll 4019. Time code 14:19. Sound roll continue 406.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:34:14:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

00:34:15:00

Interviewer:

So picking it up with what you heard.

00:34:20:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

I heard what sounded like a, a firecracker and I rushed to him. And I kneel down and took his head up in my hands and said, Martin, it will be all right. It will be all right, Martin. This is Ralph. This is Ralph. Everything is gonna be all right.

00:34:58:00

Interviewer:

That's fine. You were saying that after, after he died, I asked you what was it like. What was it like?

00:35:13:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Well, I felt that I had lost a, a part of me. I, I felt that I had to walk this lonesome valley now by myself. I knew all of the people of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the staff. I knew, I knew them well and I had worked with them. I had hired most of them and I knew their weaknesses and I knew their strong points, but I felt that I would have to walk the valley of life the rest of my days by myself without Martin Luther King.

00:36:37:00

Interviewer:

Why don't we stop it there for a second, Bobby?

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Slate it, please.

[slate]

00:36:46:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:36:49:00

Interviewer:

OK, thinking at that moment, what shape was, were you and the leadership of SCLC in and how did you, how did you get into the Poor People's Campaign then?

00:37:02:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Well, we vowed that we were going to stand together and stick together. Jim Bevel, speaking for the staff of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said, I loved Dr. King. In many respects, I loved Dr. King more than I loved Jesus. But Dr. King is now dead. But we have our leader and our leader is Ralph David Abernathy. And we are going on to Washington, but by the way of Memphis.

00:38:01:00

Interviewer:

So, the staff was never in shock?

00:38:07:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

There were people who, individual people who would cry and weep. Andrew Young was the first one that had to make his way to an area where he could give vent to his feelings. I had to cry, but I didn't cry until the next day when I saw Mrs. King, Aramis after shave lotion, coming for the body. I had held it back, all of my pent-up emotions, but I could not face Mrs. King without knowing grief and giving vent to grief. Because I, I knew that how, how much she had sacrificed and given, in the cause of letting her husband lead the movement without any strings attached.

00:39:44:00

Interviewer:

I want to finish up with, with one thing and I, I hate to ask you to do this one more time, but Bobby said there might have been some flutter in the camera. But also I wanted, wanted you to repeat it, but also softer, going back one more time to the balcony scene. Could you do that again, but just soft throughout the whole thing?

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Do you want me to do the whole thing?

Interviewer:

Sure. Just, just from, from the shot and then just through it, but just soft through, through it.

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

Beginning with the shot?

Interviewer:

Yes.

Camera Crew Member #3:

With the firecracker and then seeing his feet.

Interviewer:

Seeing his feet and then going out. Whenever you're ready.

00:40:30:00

Rev. Ralph Abernathy:

And all of a sudden, I heard what sounded like a firecracker *and I jumped naturally. And I turned and saw only his feet. And I ran to him and took his head into my hands and began to pat his cheek and said, Martin, this is Ralph. This is Ralph. This is Ralph. It will be all right. Everything is gonna be all right. Everything is gonna be all right, Martin.* And at that time, he relaxed. His eyes softly closed. And he heard me and he believed me, that it would be all right.

00:41:53:00

Interviewer:

That's good. Thank you.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:42:00:00

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