Interview with **Cleveland Sellers**
Date: February 1, 1980
Interviewer:
Camera Rolls: 1017-1021
Sound Rolls: 108-109
Team: A

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

[camera roll #1017]
[sound roll #108]

[slate]

00:00:17:00

Interviewer:

Cleve, in 1962 at Howard, you invited—you, NAG, Courtland Cox, Stokely invited Malcolm to speak. Can you describe your reactions to hearing him for the first time?

00:00:31:00

Cleveland Sellers:

In 1962, as a member of NAG, Nonviolent Action Group, at Howard University, we seized an opportunity to, to take over the Lyceum Program at Howard University. And this was fairly common among college students across the country to be involved in the student government association and other student activities on the campus. One of the things we wanted to do with the Lyceum Program is bring in speakers who were more relevant to what we contend were the needs of Black students, and bring in speakers that would challenge us, and that would make our visions wider and broader. Malcolm came, agreed to come, and it was a struggle with the administration to, to secure Malcolm's coming to the campus. Malcolm came. Malcolm was a dynamic speaker. He was very articulate. Malcolm spoke on the, the Nation of Islam and what it represented. Malcolm also talked about the need for pride and— and self-determination. Malcolm talked about how it was important that, that back

people knew something about their history. These were areas that we had known about, but no one was articulating during that particular period of time. I was tremendously impressed with Malcolm. Not with the— the notion of the states in the South but with the, the challenge to the students to begin to think, to begin to think independently, to begin to think in the context of who they were, and what they were all about. So, I, I, I would just conclude by saying that Malcolm left an impression on me. He was, he was tremendously articulate. And he, he raised some questions that I wanted to seek answers for.

00:02:23:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

00:02:25:00

Camera Crew Member:

[unintelligible]

[cut]

[slate]

00:02:28:00

Interviewer:

Nineteen sixty-three, after the March on Washington, you met with Malcolm in a coffee shop, a group of NAG members. Can you describe what went on in that meeting?

00:02:38:00

Cleveland Sellers:

During a, a, a down period during the process of the March on Washington, many of us who were members of the NAG group in Washington, DC, which was a— a friends group for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, went to a coffee shop at which we ran into Malcolm X who was at the—in Washington to, to observe the, the March on Washington. Malcolm talked to us about the contradictions of the march. Malcolm was very friendly to us because he knew that we were the same group of people who had encouraged the, the university to invite him for the Lyceum Program. Malcolm talked about the changes in the march. At first, he said that it was supposed to be a civil disobedience and now it was not. Malcolm talked about the—at first it was supposed to be primarily a Black-thrust march, and now it was integrated. Malcolm raised a lot of questions about the internal organizations, and the compromises that were being made. And he was raising that in the context of, of raising

questions in our own minds, so we could begin to observe and analyze the March from that particular perspective.

00:03:50:00

Interviewer:

Cut. [unintelligible]

00:03:54:00

Camera Crew Member:

[unintelligible]

[cut]

[slate]

00:03:56:00

Interviewer:

I've heard that Malcolm's speeches began to be a guiding voice for you all in SNCC. And during the period of time from the summer of '63 to summer of '64, can you tell me how those speeches were an influence on SNCC?

00:04:08:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Well, we were a, a student group who was interested in finding out about new ideas, about new methods for struggle. We were an appendage of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. We were on the front lines in terms of demonstrating and lobbying for legislation in Washington, picketing in, on behalf of those voters, voter rights workers and freedom workers in Mississippi. We also were responsible for gathering clothes and food for those individuals in Mississippi who had been disenfranchised as a result of their efforts to register to vote. Malcolm ideas were ideas that we discussed. We discussed ideas from persons who we felt were beginning to, to clarify for us the direction that the movement should go. We did not commit ourselves totally to any partic'lar person's philosophy, but there was always a strain of the, the self, self-determination and, and, and Black history, and Black awareness, and, and figuring out who we were and— and knowing our own history and identification. That certainly was directly related to Malcolm’s discussions, and talks, and, and we followed that through his, the books, and through seeing him on various TV programs.

00:05:33:00

Interviewer:

So now you're talking about NAG not SNCC?

00:05:36:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Well, NAG is, in essence, a friends of SNCC group. During that period of time with—on college campuses, there would be a group that would be responsible for generating fundraising opportunities, and legislating, and it would also be a feeder group for additional freedom workers to go into the Southern areas, into Mississippi, and, and Alabama, and, and Southwest Georgia. Matter of fact, the NAG group, in total, moved into Mississippi in the summer of 1964.

00:06:10:00

Interviewer:

This is Stokely, before the Peace March?

00:06:12:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Stokely, Courtland Cox, Eric Jones, Bill Mahoney, Cynthia Washington, Muriel Tillinghast, Fred Mangrum, and there were about four, five, six other people who went along with the, with Stokely and, and the other SNCC volunteers to Oxford, Ohio, and went to the orientation for the Mississippi Summer Project, and then went to Mississippi, and were primarily in the Second Congressional District in Mississippi. That is Greenwood, Mississippi, Holly Springs, Mississippi, Ruleville, all over the what is called the Delta Mississippi, the area that was concentrated most highly with, with Blacks.

00:06:56:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

[slate]

00:06:59:00

Interviewer:

September '64, you had SNCC members going to Africa, and I wanna talk about the connections that were going on between domestic issues and international issues.

00:07:10:00

Cleveland Sellers:

OK, most of us, being college students, co—had come in contact with a number of students from the African continent. After independence of the French colonies in Africa and Ghana, et cetera, many of the, the countries sent African students to the USA and, and studied in predominately Black college campuses. Inside of SNCC we were, we were conscious of the independent movement in, in Africa. And we also adopted the phrase, One man, one vote, from the effort in Ghana. And so, it was just a kind of logical extension for us to begin to, to continue to identify with Africa and independence movements in Africa. In the, in the fall of 1964, a number of, of persons representing SNCC, including Miss Fannie Lou Hamer, had an opportunity to go to Africa, and visit Ghana, and Guinea, and a number of other places on the continent. When they went, what they began to see was they began to see Blacks operating governments, Blacks operating airplanes, Blacks being chief of police, Blacks in very responsible positions. And so, it began to generate in the minds of many of those people the whole question of if that could happen in Africa, then why couldn't that happen in the United States, where Blacks could ascend to these positions of power, and authority, and responsibility. So, it began to have a fundamental impact on how we saw our struggle in terms of we needed to move it beyond talking about the, the acquisition of a Coca-Cola. We saw it as a political struggle that needed to begin to raise the question of, of registering to vote, and not only that, the empowerment of Black people in America.

00:09:04:00

Interviewer:

Donald Harris and John Lewis came back with a report and you were at that meeting when they had met Malcolm in Nairobi. Can you describe to us that meeting and what came out of it?

00:09:13:00

Cleveland Sellers:

OK. Many of the delegates returned to the United States. Donald Harris and John Lewis continued to travel to other countries. And on one of the stops, they happened to come in contact with Malcolm. And they had an opportunity to discuss with Malcolm some of the issues, in terms of the sameness of the struggles, of the relationship between Africa, the freedom fighters in Africa, and the freedom of the civil rights activists in Mississippi. And we begin to share ideas. We begin to see commonality between the liberation movements in

Africa, and the freedom fighters in Africa, and what we were doing in Mississippi. That those struggles were, in fact, the, the struggles for empowerment of, of people. When Don and those came back, they talked to the—or made a report to the SNCC conference in, in October, and they talked about the, the discussion with Malcolm. In fact, that he was beginning to, to talk about the possibility of registering people to vote. He was beginning to expand on his visions in terms of, in terms of the connectedness of the struggles and the movement. But he also, he, being Don Harris and John Lewis, also talked about the importance of us beginning to have a much better relationship, and a tighter relationship with Africa, and Malcolm, too. And beginning to see that as all one, as opposed to a des—a, a, a civil rights movement versus a, a, a human rights movement, and begin to, to widen our visions. We had to begin to talk about something very basic and fundamental, and we had to begin to deal with the question of racism, and how it played a part in, in our lives, and how it, in fact, acted as an undergirding for disenfranchisement of, of Black people.

00:11:02:00

Interviewer:

OK. Stop [unintelligible]

[cut]

[camera roll #1018]

00:11:06:00

Camera Crew Member:

Rolling. Camera roll 1018. Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:11:09:00

Interviewer:

Really like the answer you gave me there about how you were searching for ways to introduce Malcolm into the South. Let's talk about Brown Chapel and what was going on with Malcolm and SNCC at that time.

00:11:21:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Malcolm had come to, to, to Tuskegee Institute during the same period that the Selma demonstrations were in progress. And we went up to, to Tuskegee and asked Malcolm if he

would come and speak to some of the youngsters in the morning. And he agreed to do that, and we were able to bring him in. Our idea was to expand on Malcolm's identification with our struggle, and young people in the South, but at the same time to get young people to begin to appreciate the leadership and the efforts on the part of, of other leaders who were not as popular in the press. We had done that with the youngsters from Mississippi that we had taken up to Harlem in, in the early part of—in December of 1964 and we had Malcolm to talk to them about the world struggle, and how Black people fit into that struggle. Malcolm also talked about his, his appreciation for the efforts on the part of the, the civil rights workers in the Deep South, primarily Mississippi, the students which he referred to SNCC people as the students. What we were able to do is join the struggle, and get people to understand that because you're in the North you were no less discriminated as if you were in the South. And that became very important to people to see themselves not in isolation. Malcolm talked about the fact that in Mississippi, the— the persons in Mississippi should not see their struggle independent and separate from what he was trying to do in, in, in New York and in Harlem. And that we, in Harlem and in, and in Mississippi should not see our struggle separate from in Kenya, and Liberia, and, and Angola, and Southwest Africa, and places like that. So, it became important for us to, to continue to try to raise those issues, even though they might have been unpopular in the press, but it became important for us to raise those issues in our community among the young, and among that group that we worked with. Basically, sharecroppers and, and people working on the farms in the South because that's where many of the people that we came in contact with resided. And that they needed to begin to understand that they played a role, or could play a role in shaping and changing, the, their conditions.

00:13:39:00

Interviewer:

9 February '65 he died. SNCC had an official statement that they issued, press release, can you describe it?

00:13:47:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Well the— the statement was— was that we supported—

00:13:49:00

Interviewer: Statement of—?

00:13:52:00

Cleveland Sellers:

The statement that was released by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and was a, was, was read by John, John Lewis. In fact, talked about our support of Malcolm, and our concern that the struggle that Malcolm led would continue. That we needed to begin to look more and more to self-determination as, as a people. We needed to begin to talk about our history even more, the history of, of Black and African people in, in, in the Americas. And we felt like that Malcolm's assassinated was directly related to an effort to cut off a person who dared to struggle against the status quo. And we felt a, a kinship to Malcolm in that sense because we were struggling against the status quo in the South, in Georgia, and Alabama, and Mississippi. And so, what we wanted to do is we wanted to link those struggles. We also committed ourselves, across the South where we worked, to do something special on the day that they memorialized Malcolm. And the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee sent myself and John Lewis to Malcolm's funeral. And it was a, a kind of sad occasion but it was also inspirational in that we felt like we were bringing a message to Malcolm. And that message was, was that, We heard you, we were listening, and in, in, in essence, we have taken the best of what you offered, and we will continue to incorporate that in our—movement in our struggle.

00:15:20

Interviewer:

But personally, Cleve, how did you feel when you heard about the, the assassination?

00:15:24:00

Cleveland Sellers:

I was, I was quite upset and, and distressed. I was a young person still in the movement, and we had gone through the, the deaths in Mississippi. We'd gone through some other assaults, and, and battering, and beatings that had gone on, and we had lost a number of people along the way. I was just very distressed and frustrated, because I thought that we had began to, to impact on Malcolm, and Malcolm was beginning to make the, the, the shift, and was beginning to see ci—not civil rights, but human rights, as being something that he could be involved in. And those human rights organizations in the South he could be involved in, over the question of voter registration. Malcolm had said that he would assist with voter registration. We even had a, a, a kind of commitment from Malcolm to go into Mississippi to speak to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. And we saw a growth on both parts. We saw Malcolm growing. We saw SNCC growing. And that was important because as you may or may not know, during that period of time, that wasn't a, a lot of intellectual, stimulating kind of speakers on the scene. Malcolm was that. And Malcolm raised our consciousness, no question about it. And he encouraged us, and motivated us to continue to struggle, be dedicated, be committed, be disciplined. We looked at Malcolm in terms of Malcolm's whole, the fact that Malcolm had changed. He, at first, was one kind of person, he was able to change, discipline himself, educate himself, and move forward. And I think that that was the, the real essence of what we found to be the best of what Malcolm was all about.

00:17:05:00

Interviewer:

Thank you. Cut.

00:17:07:00

Camera Crew Member:

[unintelligible]

[cut]

[slate]

00:17:10:00

Interviewer:

Did success in Lowndes County affect SNCC's direction in the election of Stokely over John Lewis?

00:17:14:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Absolutely. The, the, the success in Lowndes County gave SNCC another model. We'd come out of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party effort, where we made an effort to, to get involved in the Democratic Party. Now, what we were beginning to do is we were beginning to talk about independent Black political organizations, and the need for those organizations, and how we could develop a model that would work in communities where you had a majority Black community. What, what began to happen was, was that as we began to, to see that opportunity grow, we began to, to find it necessary to begin to plant the seeds, and open up the frontier, where we could begin to let people know that there was a model, and it was independent political organizing, independent political organization. Now, when you get to, to the, the meeting in Kingston, Tennessee—Kingston, Tennessee, where Stokely defeats John Lewis, there are a lot of things that you need to take into consideration. One of which is the fact that the organization had been grappling with direction since it was involved in the National Democratic Convention of 1964, where we had anticipated that we were going to get support from the lib—liberal establishment for our Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegation. We didn't get that support. Matter of fact, what began to happen was— was that a lot of questions began to be raised about the roles of liberals in the civil rights movement. The other part of that is, is that we began to kind of look for direction, and look for ideas that would move the organization forward, and move the movement forward. Lowndes County represented that new thrust and that new idea. The other thing that you look

at when you're looking at this, this, the shift in, in leadership in the organization was the fact that John Lewis had become identified with the office, administration of the organization. And as always a, a, an, an, an, an antagonistic relationship between the field, and the, and the administration in any organizations. So, John ended up on the side of being a, an administrative person. And the field staff was saying, We want a change. We want people in office that's going to represent us, and represent our interests in moving the organization forward with programs. So, when you get to the point where the vote is taken, that issue, those issues begin to emerge. And that's when the organization took the, the initiative to change leadership. John had been involved in an effort to get SNCC to commit to a White House Conference that most of the SNCC orga—SNCC field secretaries did not want to be involved in, but John insisted. John also was involved in the Sel—the Selma demonstration. SNCC had voted not to be involved in the Selma demonstrations. So, there were some things that had happened along the way that made John's leadership at that point questionable. And the other dynamic is, is that the organization itself, SNCC, was, was people-centered, and it, its, its, its body was the group that made decisions. It was not hierarchical, and it was not bureaucratic in the sense that the leaders tell folk what to do as traditional organizations are. Leaders were controlled and were constrained by the body and the policies that were coming out of the SNCC conferences and out of the executive committee.

00:21:09:00

Interviewer:

I'm gonna cut'cha off for a minute. [unintelligible]

00:21:11:00

Camera Crew Member:

We have to change rolls.

00:21:13:00

Interviewer:

You do? OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #1019]

00:21:15:00

Camera Crew Member:

1019.

[slate]

00:21:17:00

Interviewer:

Stokely got elected. There's a new direction of SNCC. Can you describe it to us?

00:21:17:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Well, the new direction of SNCC is predicated—

00:21:26:

Camera Crew Member:

Hold it. Hold it. Mark it.

[slate]

00:21:30:00

Interviewer:

Full sentence, the new direction of SNCC at Stokely's election.

00:21:34:00

Cleveland Sellers:

The new direction of SNCC with Stokely's direction was built on several ideas. The first was was that the civil rights movement and our efforts in that would have to change, and we'd have to be moving toward a human rights struggle, where we talked about incorporating people outside of the United States and outside of the South. And the other thing was was that we talked about the importance of Black folk becoming involved in a political process that, in fact, empowered them, and that we had gone through a period where we had to appealed to the moral consciousness of America, and we had not been able to, to deal with the question of power relationships. The new direction of SNCC said that we had to talk about empowering Black people. and that's the, the, where the thrust of the movement is. We see things happening again in urban areas, in, in Watts, and in, in Harlem where there are indications that there's frustration and unrest there also.

00:22:39:00

Interviewer:

James Meredith gets shot. When did, when did you first hear about this, and what did you do?

00:22:46:00

Cleveland Sellers:

When James Meredith was shot, Stokely and I and, and some of the other SNCC people were doing an assessment and inventory of our staff and projects across the South. We were in Little Rock Arkansas at the point where James Meredith was shot. And we immediately recognized that we needed to respond, and we went to Memphis, Tennessee. In Memphis, we met with Martin King, and Floyd McKissick, and some of the other leaders had come in from around the country. In looking at the march, we recognized that, that Meredith was planning to march through what was essentially the Second Congressional District in Mississippi. That was the area that we had all worked in in the summer of '64 and through 1965. So, we felt comfortable that we knew many of the people that were going to intricately involved, or could be intricately involved, in giving the march some perspective and focus. At that point, we, we seized upon the opportunity to go forward and encouraged that the march would continue. On the first day, Floyd McKissick, and Martin King, and, and Stokely, and myself, and a few other people went out to continue the march. We thought that the, the theme of the march, March Against Fear, was very important. And we thought that not following through on that would send a, a, a negative message to Black, to the Black community and, and a very positive message to the White Citizen Council and Ku Klux Klan types. So, we thought that it was important that we continue the march. We also thought that it was an opportunity to begin to raise the question of Blacks controlling their own destiny. We were in an area that was almost 70% Black, the Second Congressional District, and we felt like we could begin to talk about registering to vote, and we talked about empowerment, and we talked about using the model in Lowndes County to adopt it to, to Mississippi. We also believed that, that it was time for the Black community to take the responsibility for assuring that it had a successful march. We had seen Selma, and we had seen Albany, Georgia, and we had seen Birmingham, where we had an en—entourage of press, and leaders, and they would come in, and once the objective was reached— their objective was reached, they would leave, and leave a vacuum, and leave a lot of frustration. And we wanted people to, to share in, if there was going to be a march, share in the leadership development, share in making decisions on what the march objectives were. We wanted them to share in providing the resources, share in the actual marching. So, we, we said that, that what the Mississippi Meredith March could be would, could be a showcase, a focal point where we can begin to talk about doing programs differently from the way they had been done across the South prior to that time.

00:25:43:00

Interviewer:

Cut. OK.

Camera Crew Member:

Cut.

[cut]

00:25:45:00

Camera Crew Member:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:25:49:00

Interviewer:

Lorraine Hotel, the meeting, and the issues involved.

00:25:52:00

Cleveland Sellers:

After we marched the first day, we all came back to Memphis, and we met at the Lorraine Motel with the other leaders from the civil rights movement, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young. And we had a meeting to de, to determine what we would do, to map out a strategy. In that meeting, ***SNCC took the position that if there was gonna be a march in Mississippi, it should be a march that's indigenous, meaning that Mississippians should be involved, and we should not call out the liberal armies from the, the North to come in and, and assist with that march.*** The other idea—notion was, was that because we were dealing with fear, that we could include the Deacons for Defense, a group out of, of Southern Louisiana. The other idea was that we would register people along the way, and get the involvement of the entire community in Mississippi in the Second Congressional District, and make it a march that would impact on their lives. Not only in terms of, of voter registration but certainly in the development of leadership, and leadership styles, and abilities. What happened, though, was that Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young were opposed to the idea. They did not want the Deacons involved. They were opposed to not making a national call, and they were certainly opposed to the idea of just having local people involved. Because they said if you just had local people involved, you could not raise the, the revenue, and the resources, to support the march going through Mississippi. We, we stuck by our position. What we were able to do wa we were able to, to talk with Floyd McKissick, who agreed in principle with us, and then the deciding vote fell to Martin Luther King. At that point, Martin King also was interested, interested in seeing more involvement on the part of, of local people in this effort, to talk

about a March Against Fear. Fear of whom? Fear against what? So, Martin sided with us. And at that point Floyd—I'm sorry, Whitney Young and Roy Wilkins kind of stomped out of, out of the room, and they said, It would not be successful and that we were taking advantage of the civil rights movement, the whole litany of, of accusations that had been kind of swirling around for some time. And they went on back to New York. And the next day, we began to organize the people in Mississippi who we had worked with during the prior two years, and began to get in place those organizers, and resources, and began to move the march down the, down the highway. The focal point then becomes the point of voter registration. And we just felt that it was a golden opportunity to register as many people in that area as we possibly could register in that area. And I think to, to the extent that we kept that focus, we were successful. The other thing was, was that we wanted to, to, to talk about a kind of Black self-determination, Black, Black self, self-assurance, Black pride. Those were the, the items that, that were beginning to swirl around, not only in Mississippi, but across the country. Black people were beginning to articulate the need for, for those kinds of ideals, and we felt like it was an, an opportune time for us to bring those ideals forward, and make them legitimate for all of Black America.

00:29:32:00

Interviewer:

Was there a discussion about the role of Whites in the march?

00:29:34:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Well, when I, when I use the terms liberals, we're talking about, about Whites in the march. We, we did not say that Whites could not be involved in the march. Our concern was, was that a national call would not be made. If you look at Selma, and if you look at Albany, Georgia, there was national call made and, and you had an onslaught of people from outside of the areas coming into the area for that one particular event. And then those people would then pack up and, and leave, and, and what you would have behind is a lot of confusion, and a lot of frustration, and disappointment. Because the community itself was left with essentially no organization, leadership would probably be all in conflict. And we didn't want to have that situation happen in Mississippi. We took a lot of pride in Mississippi because we had been there so long.

00:30:24:00

Interviewer:

Talk about the Deacon of Defense—for Defense, and of their role, and how if Whites were there, it would cause some kind of problems.

00:30:33:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Well, I, you know, the, the whole idea of the Deacons for Defense meant that they were, they were, in fact, armed, and their responsibility was to make sure that the march was, in fact, safe. They walked the sides of the hillsides and, and in the bush and, and that kind of area, to make sure that there were no additional sharpshooters or vigilantes in those areas to attack the march. That was a program and a role that the Deacons for Defense had taken on some time. It was not a, a program of SNCC. It was not a program of, of SCLC. It was not a program of CORE. So, we felt like it had been developed in the South. We felt very close to many of the members of the Deacons for Defense. We understood their commitment and dedication, and we felt that they could be involved, in, in that effort.

00:31:24:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

[cut]

[camera roll #1020]

00:31:30:00

Camera Crew Member:

Mark it, please

[slate]

00:31:33:00

Interviewer:

How was it decided the call for Black Power to come up in the, in the march?

00:31:36:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Well I think the, that the call for Black Power, per se, was not designed as a, as a, a term that would come up at any particular time. I think it was, it was just the timing of, of the Greenwood demonstration and rally. Each night after the marchers had taken the, the twenty or thirty miles, there would be a rally. And we'd have—Martin King would speak, and Floyd

McKissick would speak, and then Stokely would speak. The next night they would revert the order, and you'd have Floyd McKissick, Stokely, and then Martin King. And it would change up every night. One of the things that was happening along the way was that Black folk would come out to see Martin King. They'd heard about him, they'd never seen him. Thought they would never, ever see him. And it was a, it was a good feeling because they, they came to touch the hem of the garment. And I think, in a lot of instances, Martin was kind of embarrassed by it. Because they would literally kiss his feet and bring him something, a drink of water, an apple, an orange, or something. They just wanted to, to be in the area. They could not allow this opportunity to pass them by. Martin Luther King was going to be walking down the street, and they would come from twenty, and thirty, and forty, and fifty miles away, just to be able to see him. And they would just—there would be groups along the highways of just sharecroppers and, and poor people, and they would just, just be, just along the highway. And the interesting thing was there were cases where there were a number of Whites who would come out also, to see Martin Luther King make that pilgrimage down the highway. When we get to Greenwood, Greenwood is the area that was the Congressional District Headquarters. When we were in Mississippi in 1964 with the Mississippi Summer Project, and Stokely was the project director, so he was very familiar to most of the people in Greenwood. Matter of fact when they found out that he was going to be speaking that night, I think more people came out as a result of their being able to identify very directly with Stokely and he—his role as a freedom fighter in that community, dodging the bullets, and, and the, the vigilantes, and, and trying to put forward a movement. What happened was was that when we went into, to Greenwood to set up the tent so that we could have the program that night, we were setting it up on a Black high school athletic field, and the police came in and arrested Stokely, and that information went through the community quite rapidly. And what it raises is, is that even if the community chose to allow something as important to it as this march to come into its community, it could be cut out of the des—out of the decision-making process. So, it raises a question of power. And I think that that's where we began to talk more and more. We had been talking about the acquisition of power, but now we had gotten to a clear example that we could use, and during the period of, of the warm up, you had Willie Ricks up, and he would kind of introduce each of the speakers, and he would say, What do we want? Black Power! What do we want? Black Power! And then when, then later on, during the program, we were able to get Stokely freed from jail, or released from jail, and he came, and he picked up on the theme. But what happens is, is that he was able to articulate using the model in Lowndes County, using our history in the civil rights movement, to begin to focus in on Black Power, and what it meant. And so, I think that, you know, when he got up on the podium you had a lot of people who were very excited, they were very happy that he had gotten out of jail. They were happy that he was still struggling. They could relate to those kinds of things. And when he said, following, following Willie Ricks, What do we want? Black Power! He, he even answered the question, and with a fist, and it, it had meaning. And I think that's what was captured on the film footage, and projected around the world as, as being a very negative kind of thing. But for many Black people it's the first time that, that we had said something, at that particular point, that was relevant. Black Power! Black Power! We remember Freedom Now. That was another term. Black Power took on another character, because of, well, not only Freedom Now, but Freedom. Black Power took on another character because it had Black attached to it, but we didn't back down from it. We

just thought that we needed to push it forward, and make it a term that Black people control as opposed to the media or any other community.

00:36:23:00

Interviewer:

How were you feeling personally?

00:36:25:00

Cleveland Sellers:

I was feelin' very good. I had worked in Holly Springs, Mississippi, so I knew a lot of the people along the way. Many of the staffers in Mississippi were local, indigenous Mississippians. We felt like we were getting people registered to vote. We were talking about the political process. We were talking about empowerment. We had a lot of enthusiasm. We had beat the odds. We did not need those resources that Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young were holding us hostage for. We felt like every time we had a rally, it was full. I mean, we had a lot of people there. We were moving steadily down the highway. We were making a lot of progress, and we felt like the culmination in, in Jackson, what we would leave behind is a lot of enthusiasm, a lot of hope, a lot of, of, of a, a, a kinda dedicated people, who now had the motivation to go forward in their particular communities.

00:37:17:00

Interviewer:

But you had violence in Canton and Philadelphia. Can you talk about that violence?

00:37:21:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Well in, in Canton, I can talk about it. I was not in Canton. I, I would probably prefer to talk about what happened in Philadelphia.

00:37:29:00

Interviewer:

Let's go with that.

00:37:29:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Well, Philadelphia was the area where Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney had been killed, the summer of '64, and it was an area that, that I personally had been in, because I went in there to try to look for the bodies in, in the summer of '64. And we felt a kind of, of, of bitterness about Philadelphia, because we knew that they were murdered but there was not going to be any justice done. So, we felt like we needed to go back to Philadelphia, even though the march was coming down the, the eastern part of the state of Mississippi. We felt it important to, to move over to Philadelphia, and make a statement. And we did that. And we went into Philadelphia, and as I remember, Martin King was kneeling and praying, and—and all the people who went to Philadelphia, we had a little, short march. We were kneeling down praying. And I, I remember Dr. Abernathy giving the prayer, and he was saying something to the effect of, Let us pray for those who have murdered our comrades, our friends, and wherever they may be. And over from out of the back, you heard this response saying, Well, we're standing right over here. And that was quite terrifying, because you knew that that was a serious retort, because we're talking about the sheriffs and the deputies who were involved, and many of the outstanding citizens. So, at that point, people recognized that the, the situation was turning. We had absolutely no protection from the local police authority, or the state police authority, or the federal government. So, we felt like it was important for us to try to turn around, and ease out of that community. But what, what happened there was, I think Martin King became really, an eyewitness to the violent nature of Mississippi, and how hostile the place could be. And we were able to get out of there before anybody was hurt seriously. There were some scuffles that took place. But we just got out of there barely with our lives, we feel. And that began to, to change the dynamic, and get people to understand the nature of the struggle, and the commitment and dedication on the part of many SNCC people, who had to work under those conditions for long, long, long periods of the time, without any kind of outlet. And we were able to, to change, Mississippi, and to talk about a social movement. We were able to develop one in Mississippi, and so we, we, we, we came out of, out of Philadelphia, and we went on back to the major march area, and continued to march into Jackson.

00:40:11:00

Interviewer:

The relationship between Stokely and Martin Luther King.

00:40:15:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Well, the, the relationship between Stokely and Martin was, I think, a very warm kinda relationship. We all knew that we had differences in terms of strategies and our tactics. I'll give you one example, that Martin believed in non-violence as a way of life. Our concern about non-violence was only tactical. We used it when it became important for your survival to use non-violence. But we recognized that, and we discussed those kinds of things, and we could, we were able to resolve it. What happens in a lot of instances is, is that the press began

to use these differences, even though they might have been completely minor, to create rifts, and try to break up the unity that existed within the, in the civil rights movement. And I'm not saying that we didn't disagree tactically, organizationally. We did. But I think there was a personal relationship among SNCC people and SCLC people that was, that was very good and very healthy. Now, those relationships were strained at different times, but we always managed to work our way through it. We had respect for some of the organizers. They had respect for many of our people, based on our dedication, and based on our commitment, and based on our ability to go into those areas, those recalcitrant areas in Mississippi, and fight for social justice and democracy for all.

00:41:36:00

Interviewer:

But wasn't there something going on between Stokely and, and, and King with Black Power! Freedom! Black Power! Freedom! as they were marching. Wasn't Stokely kind of egging him on?

00:41:45:00

Cleveland Sellers:

Well, I think, I think that, that we were trying to make sure that, that, that what we were doing was in concert with everybody else. And we were trying to bring people along as fast as we could. I mean the, the question of Lowndes County, that was a SNCC experience. The question of the Atlantic City Challenge, that was a SNCC experience. So, in terms of where we were going, that becomes a SNCC experience. SNCC was always on the cutting edge. And we were always trying to influence the civil rights movement, in terms of moving it forward. The whole ide—the whole question of the Vietnam War, another issue, that SNCC put out there, based on its work in Mississippi. Believe it or not. So, we were always trying to sensitize the rest of the movement—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild audio]

Cleveland Sellers:

—and bring it along. So, it would understand what we were about, so that we wouldn't get out there, and somebody would come along and say, Well, we don't understand what you're doing. And what happens is, is that there's a, a division that's created, by some kinda media assumption about what's going on. Now that did happen with Black Power, but we made an effort to, to make it clear.

Interviewer:

OK, then.

[cut]

[camera roll #1021]

00:42:53:00

Camera Crew Member:

[unintelligible] 21. New camera roll. Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:42:56:00

Interviewer:

Questions of self-defense, the Deacons of Def—for Defense and what went on in Philadelphia, Mississippi.

00:43:01:00

Cleveland Sellers:

OK. I think that, that, that I—that the Deacons for Defense was a group of backs from in the South, in Louisiana, that the responsibility was to, to defend their communities, or defend themselves against attack. It was not, never a group of retaliation. I think that one of the things that we can look at in, in Philadelphia, Mississippi, or anywhere along the march, the, the mode of non-violence was still there, but I think we were beginning to come grips with the fact that we had to be real with people, in terms of if somebody attacked you, that you expected to be able to protect yourself. So, the whole idea, the notion of self-defense was a growing, notion inside of SNCC, and inside of other civil rights organizations. Non-violence was a tactic for SNCC, and we used it as a tactic. Everybody in SNCC was not—believed non-violent as a way of life, as a philosophy. In Philadelphia, Mississippi, I think that it was non-violence that assisted us in getting out of there. If we would have gotten involved in a, a confrontation in Philadelphia, Mississippi, we all probably'd been history. And that's the way you look at it. When you look at the, the hostile nature of areas, Philadelphia, Mississippi was one of those areas. Or if you looked at Mississippi, the chances of you provoking through retaliation a response were very good, probably more so than many of the other states. So on the march, we involved the Deacons for Defense to protect the marchers, if they could eliminate an aggressive action, or eliminate the sharpshooters, or people taking advantage of the march, then that's what they would do, and that's what we tried to do. We tried to learn from them. They would tell us certain things we needed to know along the way. They would go into the wooded areas. They would check the intersections. They would check cars out. They would keep their eyes on, on all of these.

00:45:06:00

Interviewer:

But the spirit was around self-defense.

00:45:08:00

Cleveland Sellers:

The spirit was around self-defense, certainly. And that was, like I say, this, this is something that's emerging inside of the movement, and what we're beginning to see is a shift away from, from just talking about non-violence. And in order for you to shift away, you see other, phil—philosophies kind of creeping in, other tactics creeping in. Now, we're talking about empowerment, and we're talking about Black empowerment. Not only registering to vote, we already had won the—a, a, secured the, the 1965 Voters' Rights Act, but we're talking about how to vote, and how to get the kind of power, so that you wouldn't have to worry about being a registered voter, and the person who you have elected, either by omission, is the one who comes to your house, and beats you up, and drag you off to jail. We were beginning to raise those kinds of questions, and beginning to try to find solutions to the problems that people faced in their communities.

00:46:06:00

Interviewer:

You are now in Jackson, and at the end of the march. What were your feelings about the future of the civil rights movement based on what you had seen happening with the splits that were occurring in Philadelphia?

00:46:17:00

Cleveland Sellers:

We were, we were—

00:46:20:00

Interviewer:

You were in Jackson [unintelligible].

00:46:21:00

Cleveland Sellers:

In, in, in Jackson, when we get to Jackson, and this is the culmination of the march. We are all in—living in the Tougaloo area, or camping out in the Tougaloo area, and we're setting up for the, for the finale. This is the big rally, and speech, and all that kinda stuff. There was a certain amount of, of excitement and there was a, a energizing feeling that was among many of the SNCC people, because we felt like we had been successful in pushing back some of the persons who were giving definition to the, to the movement, and, and allowing people to have an opportunity to speak. If Black people wanted to secure empowerment through an effort called Black Power, then they should have that opportunity. And people should not be frightened away because they lose resources, or because they no longer were considered popular, or they no longer had control of their flock. We didn't, we didn't feel that same way. The efforts here was to push the, the community as far as we could, to try to educate it, try to, try to develop models by which it could further organize itself. A—and to be real and honest, most of the work that was done by SNCC was done in Black communities and that's the reality. SNCC as an organization had always been run and, and led primarily by predominantly Black staff and, and operation. So, it's, it wasn't anything new, it was just a perception.

00:47:54:00

Interviewer:

Was there a different feeling, though, I mean, at the end of the march?

00:47:57:00

Cleveland Sellers:

There was a different feeling for us because now we had worked our way, as we, as we saw it, out of the quagmire. People were energized, and they were ready to go off to work. They began to see the model of Lowndes County as having some validity, and that, that information was passed around. So, we're beginning to, to look at other areas. Even talking about urb, urban organizing in those areas where the rebellions had taken place. Talked about going in, and organizing, and focusing those energies. We even talked about definitions. The—during that period of time, we talked about, well, what the news media put—projected was these riots, where people were just all over, and not—and losing direction, and perspective, and that whole kind of thing. We talked about it in the context of urban rebellions. So we could give focus to a lot of things that were going on, and try to focus the energies of Black people into something that was constructive, that would build for them the kind of, of, of net that we felt was important. That is the whole issue of empowerment, voting, homes, education, jobs, and all the rest of that.

00:49:01:00

Interviewer:

Thank you. Cut.

[cut]

00:49:05:00

Camera Crew Member:

Continuation of [unintelligible]. Mark it.

[slate]

00:49:09:00

Interviewer:

The Lorraine Motel, raising the issues that plagued the march, can you talk about that?

00:49:12:00

Cleveland Sellers:

When we finished the march for the first day, we returned to the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, and at that point, we met up with Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young, representing the NAACP and the Urban League. We had some concerns, that is, SNCC had some concerns about how the march would, would unfold. We were going back to develop a strategy for the continuation of the march. When we went back, we raised several issues. One was the inclusion of the Deacons for Defense. We wanted them to be involved in the march. Two was we did not want a national call to be made. We wanted to keep the march indigenous to Mississippi, indigenous to the South, primarily. Three was that we wanted people, local people in Mississippi, to have a role in the march. We wanted them to provide the resources. We wanted them to have an opportunity to set up rallies and to be involved. The question of March Against Fear impacted directly on people in Mississippi, and we felt like in order to make that statement, they had to be involved. They had to make the step out, and say that I am not frightened by vigilantes, and Ku Klux Klan's, and, and people who are going to try to oppress me, and take advantage of me. What happens then is that those more moderate civil rights leaders, Martin, I mean, Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young, were reluctant about the inclusion of the Deacons for Defense. They wanted to have a national call, and they wanted to bring in people so that they could generate the resources external to Mississippi to carry off the march. And we discussed that issue, and we were able to lobby Floyd McKissick from CORE to our position, and then it became a vote, and the, the final decision would ha—would, would have been made by Martin King. Martin King did side with us in the effort to put the march together, and that infuriated Roy Wilkins and, and Whitney Young, and they just, you know, went through a whole litany of calling us rabble-rousers, and we didn't understand the dynamics of the civil rights movement, and all that, and they slammed their briefcases, and stomped out of the meeting, going back to New York to,

to, to make very derogatory remarks about the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. But what happened was I think we began to weld together much closer SCLC, CORE, and, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Those were the three groups that had a primary interest in Mississippi. Now you did have a local NAACP organization in Mississippi, but nationally, SCLC and CORE and SNCC were the major organi— organizations operating in Mississippi. SNCC being the primary organization organizing in Mississippi. But what happens next is, is that we, the three groups, began to—pooling our meager resources and, and contact the, the people for setting up mass meetings and rallies along the highway. And we began to, to get people involved, and the idea of Martin Luther King marching against fear in Mississippi was an idea that time had come in terms of Mississippi, and many people responded from throughout the state. So, we were successful in generating the, the, the interest and generating the crowds that we would have generated if we had gone the other way, and made the calls for a number of people to come in from the, from the North. But we did not want the march to be overtaken by a lot of, of Whites from outside the community, as had happened in some of the other communities. And we thought that it became important, if we were talking about self-determination, and pride, and, and effort against fear, for Black folk to make that statement.

00:53:28:00

Interviewer:

Keep on talking about this White—

00:53:29:00

Camera Crew Member:

OK. We have to change rolls.

00:53:30:00

Interviewer:

No. We, we'll let it go then. Thank you.

[cut]

[end of interview]

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