

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Ruby Sales
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Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 1:32:09

Joe Mosnier: ... 2011. My name –

John Bishop: Can you say that again?

JM: Sure.

JB: Okay.

JM: To start, today is Monday, April 25, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm here in collaboration with the National Museum of African American History and Culture. We are in Atlanta, Georgia, um, with Ms. Ruby Sales. Good afternoon.

Ruby Sales: Good afternoon.

JM: Thank you so much for sitting down. It's a pleasure to be with you.

RS: It's a pleasure to be with you, too.

JM: Uh, we are here for, uh, uh, an interview in the Museum series on, uh, civil rights history, although, as we have touched on in our comments before we started today, we may talk about even that phrase and its relation to the history we're describing.

[Clears throat] Um, Ms. Sales, thank you so much, and let's start if we could with – I'm interested to have you reflect a little bit about your father and mother. I noticed in my preparation that you described at one point your father as having been somewhat radicalized by the Korean War experience.

RS: Yes.

JM: But also, of course, probably the experience of growing up an African American man in the American South in his era. So, I'd be – and your mother, too, was someone who would be forceful in public context in certain instances.

RS: Yes.

JM: So, I'm just interested in your reflections on your parents.

RS: Well, let's begin with my father. My father was the son of a woman who was either born in slavery, in enslavement, or immediately after. And we don't know how, but she learned how to read and write. And she was a teacher, uh, and valued education very much. And met my grandfather, who we think came down south from Virginia through the migration after the Civil War and landed up in LaGrange, Georgia, and moved from LaGrange, Georgia, to Birmingham – to Birmingham and throughout that area as an itinerant preacher. And he married my grandmother, who had thirteen children, and my father was one of those children.

And my father joined first the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camp, and then later joined the Army, and was also ordained as a Baptist minister and functioned as a

chaplain in the Army, um, and was very much insightful in terms of the contradiction between being in the Army and having to live in a segregated and racist society.

Not only that, he was a highly intelligent man, who talked with us constantly about the issues of World War II. So, I grew up knowing about Pork Chop Hill. I grew up knowing about the Big Three, Stalin and – and so, my father – what I'm really trying to say is that my father gave to us a world that had some context and meaning, and within that world, race figured largely. And he was very much active in raising the question during the Korean War about black men dying on foreign soil when they could not vote at home.

And my mother, having grown up, a very *hard* economic reality, having to fend for herself, developed a certain characteristic and a certain strength that prevailed in all that she did, and she was not someone to be passive. She was not someone to submit to oppression very lightly. We didn't want to go downtown with her *ever*, because if someone in the store disrespected her, it was going to be a scene. [Laughing] So, we didn't want to go with her.

JM: And you mean specifically in relation to a white person who might disrespect her?

RS: Yes, a white person who would disrespect her in stores – she would definitely have a lot to tell them about what they had done. And, of course, being, you know, self-conscious as young people, we just were totally embarrassed.

JM: Um, you also would spend occasional summers, I understand, in Jemison, Alabama, with your –

RS: Yes, which is where my grandmother lived.

JM: Tell me a little bit about that experience.

RS: Well, that experience was a very important experience for me on another level that gave my life context. I would say, without exaggerating, thirty percent of that town were Saleses and were my relatives. And, uh, I could go to the cemetery and see generations of Saleses laid out in the cemetery. And in addition to that, uh, I was – I had uncles and aunts and cousins, so I was a part of a large extended family and, uh, I knew the history of that family.

And I also began to see myself in relationship to my aunts. Let me tell you what I mean. [5:00] Somebody would say, “You’re just like your Aunt Nen.” Or somebody would say that you’re just like your Aunt Rae. So, I had some – and so, all of my life I saw myself as a Sales, rather than as a Fletcher, which is what my mother was, a Fletcher. I was always a Sales – in temperament, in looks, and in a love for knowledge. My father was very, very smart.

JM: Hmm. Your father – he had or had not fought in the First World War – I’m sorry, excuse me, the Second World War?

RS: He had fought for a while in the Second War and in the Korean War.

JM: Yeah.

RS: But the Second War was a little bit different, because people really felt like they were fighting for democracy in a very different kind of way than they felt during the Korean War.

JM: Right.

RS: So, that was a little bit different for him.

JM: Right. You've also spoken a little bit about your experiences in something of a – of a dual world as a child –

RS: Yes.

JM: Given that your father's NCO [non-commissioned officer] status in the Army meant that you had certain experiences on base that were not then replicated in society more generally.

RS: Yes, that you – once we left Columbus, Georgia, which is about ten miles from Fort Benning, we could ride on the front of the bus or anywhere we wanted to ride, because of Truman's integration of the Army. And in addition to that, we could go to movie theaters, uh, integrated movie theaters. We could go to integrated restaurants. And, um, a hospital – and we could go to an integrated hospital where the doctors were white and very different from southern white doctors.

JM: But, for all of that, it sounds as if your – and we'll come to this in a moment or two – it sounds as if your real awakening to a more active consciousness about race and – um, doesn't happen, really, until you are a little bit older.

RS: No, it doesn't, not on a real conscious level.

JM: Yeah.

RS: But it *is* operating. This is how it's operating. I don't have words for it, but my friends – we would go into department stores or women's stores and ask to try on bathing suits. And would do things – for example, we sat on the front of the bus, rang the buzzer, got out, and started laughing and running. So, in our very childish ways, I think, every – a lot of children in the South will recount stories where they challenged the

system without realizing what they were doing, because intuitively we knew that there was something wrong with it that was – and that it wasn't nice or fair to us.

JM: Yeah. What was the nature of your primary schooling? Where did you go to – where did you go to primary school?

RS: I started out at a Catholic high school [nb: she intended elementary school] called Mother Mary Mission, because at that time my parents did not want me to go to a one-room schoolhouse. And then, in the third grade, in my neighborhood, which was Carver Heights, one of the first subdivisions in Columbus, Georgia, principally because many of the men were affiliated with the military and got FHA loans, I then transferred to Carver High School [nb: she intended Carver Elementary School; the high school was also called Carver], which was an incredible, uh, elementary school, uh, where – uh, it was an all-black elementary school with incredible teachers who really believed that we were capable of achieving our highest potential and pushed us to do it. And so, my high school was like – my elementary school was like two blocks from my house, and so was my high school.

And my high school was a training ground for citizenship, for creativity, and for scholarship, and my principal, S. P. [Samuel Prince] Charleston, and my homeroom teacher set the highest standards up for academic excellence. And we – although the world might have argued that black students were inferior, none of that touched us, because we thought that we were leaders, we thought we were smart, and we thought – we certainly thought that we were first-class students.

And so, in many ways, their gifts that they brought were two things: that they were able to insulate us from segregation in a way that kept us from being broken-winged

birds. The other thing that they did that was really a tremendous gift is that they had the capacity to keep on fertilizing the ground of education and building generations when there was no evidence that their work would bear fruit. And rather than approaching it from a despondent, uh, position, they were exuberant. The work meant everything.

And the other thing that was very significant is that they connected young people with the project of freedom, that we had a role in that. And our role was not just to get an education for our own career advancement, but our role was to get an education to play a role in moving forward the entire community.

JM: [Coughs] Yeah, um. [10:00] So, you had the considerable advantages of this kind of experience with parents, as you've described, with an elementary school setting, as, as, um, encouraging as the one you did. I – [in response to Ms. Sales] yes, please.

RS: *And* a culture that took pride in our achievements and a culture of people who themselves were deeply invested in the process, so that there was a connection between what our parents did and what the neighbors did, and they saw the school as part of a collective investment. They literally created a countercultural education, where *right in the glare of segregation* they managed to create good schools and good students.

JM: Um-hmm. Were you – how did you – what was your social crowd as a high schooler?

RS: I have to confess I was in the in crowd. I was a cheerleader. Umm, I had a lot of mouth for a young girl. [Laughs] I was the editor of the newspaper, in the Honor Society, pretty well known, not only in my school, but throughout the community – throughout the community. So, I would say that I had a very, very busy social life, very

connected social life. And I would also say that I was pretty much a rebel. I challenged some of the rules and got away with it.

JM: And you got away with it because of kind of who you were as a full young person, or because also who your parents were, or because your teachers were savvy enough to kind of let you have some of that space?

RS: Because my homeroom teacher was one of the most powerful teachers at the school. And also because they recognized that, beyond my rebelliousness, I had something worth cultivating, and they didn't want to rein me in too much to break my spirit. And so, that was one of – another reason why I was allowed to rebel. And I think that they knew that rebellion was the substance of survival. In a – they didn't want us to accommodate to segregation. They didn't want us to get killed, but they didn't want us to accommodate.

And I think also it was because I belonged to a family who was thought to have the smartest kids in Columbus. So, I think all of that played a great role in what I was allowed to do.

JM: Yeah. You moved at a very young age, sort of measured by today's standards, I guess, towards Tuskegee.

RS: Yes.

JM: Can you explain how you came to shift there at such a young age, in '63?

RS: Because there was a program throughout the South that if you could pass a test, you could go to school at a very early age. Some people went at fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen years old, and I went at sixteen years old.

And, um, I went to Tuskegee because my homeroom teacher, Marion Pitts Armstrong, went to Tuskegee. I had some notion in my rebellious state that I wouldn't go to college first. I would go to the Army. Well, that was a delusion. First of all, I wasn't old enough. Secondly, when my mother found out about it, she went right down to the recruiting office [laughing] and reminded them that I wasn't old enough. And then, I thought I'd go to Drake University in Iowa. Well, that was also a fantasy, and I ended up going to Tuskegee.

JM: Um-hmm. Tell me about, um – tell me about the experience of landing at Tuskegee in the fall of '63, because, obviously, um, the early '60s have been tumultuous in so many respects in the United States around race and other issues, but especially race, of course. And, um, uh, you arrived at a time when there was an awful lot happening in Alabama.

RS: Yes. The Movement in Alabama resonates at Tuskegee when I get there. As a matter of fact, Gwen Patton, who becomes the president of the student body, was part of the Montgomery boycott and had been around the Movement since she was a young child. So, she brought *to* Tuskegee movement consciousness. In addition to that, Professor Gomillion had been involved in challenging gerrymandering in Tuskegee. So, Tuskegee already had built there, when we got there, an atmosphere of protest and movement.

JM: Um-hmm.

RS: And our dean, Dean [Betrand] Phillips, encouraged us to be involved in the Movement, unlike many deans. And so, when Gwen Patton asked the student body – let me just go back a moment –

JM: Sure, please.

RS: To say that when I first arrived at Tuskegee I did not choose to be a part of the movement. I wanted to be a beatnik. And so, I was running around Tuskegee, trying to be a beatnik, [laughing] drinking wine at the local pub, hanging out, you know, quoting poetry, Al Ginsberg. [15:00] And so, I did not have any thought of being in the Movement, because I had built my life around Virginia Woolf and, um, had built my life around Greenwich Village – in my head. And so, Tuskegee was just a road, a penance I had to do before I could go to the Village. [Laughs] And so, that was not in my mind.

Uh, and – so, Stokely Carmichael came to campus, and people from Lowndes County came to campus, and they gave a rousing conversation about the importance of participating in the Movement. And it was at that moment that I became galvanized and I became interested in the Movement. And so, I threw away my Catawba Pink. I cut my, uh, ponytails and I began to grow natural hair. And I went down to Dallas County, Alabama.

But that was not until after we had the demonstration, students at Tuskegee, in protest for the beatings that had occurred on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. And we were locked-in at the capital in Montgomery, surrounded by – you know, you have to understand this is a new experience – surrounded by men with billy clubs, horses, men on horses, wouldn't let us go to the bathroom. And, yes, these are features of segregation, but you have to understand that, as students, we had not come up against that, because our parents had made the soil so safe. And I don't know how they did it, but they did.

So this – what I'm trying to say is that that day shook my life when the horses started charging and the men, and those white men started swinging the billy clubs. And

I must tell you I was so naïve – I’m almost ashamed to admit this – that I kept looking up in the sky, because I had grown up with this notion of God on a mighty chariot delivering God’s children. And if you were doing the right thing, then you would be delivered.

And I waited and waited and waited, and no chariot, and no God. And that day I lost my Southern Baptist religion and began to contextualize the world beyond theological terms, looking for social and economic terminologies to explain the world.

So, I would say – and it was in that setting that I saw the power of nonviolence when Annie Pearl Avery, one of the SNCC women, broke through the line to bring us food, because we had – no one could bring us food. The police would let no one come in the – in the church. And I saw this little woman, when the police raised his hand to hit her with a billy club, I saw her simply ask him, dead in the eyes, “Who are you going to hit? What are you going to do with that?” And, to my astonishment, he dropped it, and she came through the line. By this time, my little Columbus, Georgia mind is blown! And so, I was at, at that moment, very committed to moving forward.

My homeroom teacher, Mrs. Armstrong, drove eighty miles from Columbus, Georgia, to ask me to leave the church, because we had others – and her other students who were in the church to leave. And they left, and I didn’t. And she said something, like, to me, “I should have known that you wouldn’t have left.” But that was a defining moment for me where I separated myself out from the approval of older adults about whether I should or should not be in the Movement.

JM: [Coughs] Excuse me.

RS: And breaking many taboos. It meant going to a Freedom House and being in the same – sleeping in the same room with men whom you were not having sex with, but

redefining the nature of relationships between men and women, that you could actually sleep in the bed with a man and not have sex, that there was something between men and women called comradeship and friendship. So, we were breaking *all kinds* of boundaries by being in the Freedom House.

JM: I had not, um, until just now, understood that your active participation didn't start until after Bloody Sunday, then.

RS: Yes.

JM: This is spring of '65.

RS: This is spring '65.

JM: Okay, so you've been a whole year and a semester, then, at Tuskegee, watching this –

RS: No, we haven't been watching because, as I said, Gwen Patton is a part –

JM: Yeah.

RS: And so, she's been – things have been happening on campus. Some of them I participated in, and others I didn't, and many of them had to do with talking with the community about what was going on in Selma. But my major commitment was not Movement at that point. It wasn't that I wasn't doing things, but that wasn't a commitment. I was a beatnik. I was not a freedom fighter.

JM: Yeah. Tell me a little bit more about, um, the, the – your first encounter in Montgomery at the protest with [20:00] a couple of things. One with – you said a moment ago that it really does kind of sweep away your naïveté to encounter that sort of rage and violence and –

RS: Yes.

JM: And, um – but also, um, I imagine there must have been questions that emerged from the fact that you didn't get the warmest reception even at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church [pause] from the deacons, as I understand.

RS: I don't think it was questions; I think it was totally amazement.

JM: Oh.

RS: I think it went beyond asking questions to really being stunned and trying to make a – make a connection to understand how these people, who had been at the forefront of the Movement, could lock us out of their church, could want us to leave the church, and not give us food. So, it was – so, yes, that happened. And at the same time, I saw what happened to Stokely Carmichael – reach the end of his limit at that period and basically have a nervous breakdown in the Montgomery airport, because of all the violence and his years of being under siege.

So, many things were changing how I – but I was not angry with the deacons because they were the deacons. I was not angry with them, because oftentimes – because I guess I had been reared in an environment where you could question your elders, you could even not do what they say do, but you couldn't harbor a deep hate and anger. So, I let it go, because that had to do with them, I felt, and very little to do with where I was going. And, seeing it that way, I did not hold any grudges against them, and none of us did.

JM: Very quickly after Montgomery, you'll – within the space of a few months –

John Bishop: [unintelligible brief remark]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: Yes.

JB: Okay, we're rolling.

JM: I want to ask a couple of things. I'd like to – to the extent that these were questions actively on your mind in that time at Tuskegee and as you were transitioning, and we'll get to these other things in a moment, over to Lowndes County – your notion of yourself as a woman, young woman. Um, you mention Gwen Patton, you mention – I know that, um, also, in other contexts –

RS: Jean Wiley, my professor. Yes.

JM: Jean Wiley was a very important influence. Your sense of how, perhaps – was there a shift, an evolution, a development in your sense of yourself as a woman in that time?

RS: As I said, there had always been a perception of myself through the eyes of southern black women, who were very busy on many fronts. But where the shift came for me in a very profound way was rethinking what is my role in life. Do I have to get married? Do I have to have 2.5 children? How is it that I fashion a life for myself that represents my horizon rims and where I'm headed? So, in that way, I think, how I moved in the world on that level as a woman began to really, really change.

And how I began to relate to men began to really, really change, because men – I began to see men, as I said earlier, not merely through, uh, boyfriend and girlfriend terms, but through friendship terms, and began to develop a deep trust in men, because we worked together and had to depend on each other. So, in an ironical way, as I was expanding my womanhood, I was also expanding how I saw men and the value of men, that I was not reducing them to a sexual object.

JM: Right. After Montgomery, you had firsthand and pretty emphatic encounter with a lot of fear, and I wonder – let me ask two questions that run together. One is why do you think *you* were willing, you personally were willing, to step forward and move towards Lowndes County and into an arena of such anxiety and active day-to-day worry and fear about your wellbeing? Why were you willing to do it? And why are some people willing to do it, and others are not?

RS: I think that I was willing to do it because, as I said to you, my father spoke out against issues and my mother spoke out against issues, and although her speaking out embarrassed me, it had a very profound impact on having me understand that I could defend myself.

The other thing is I had such a big mouth in school that my principal would always say to me, “You’re going to be a great civil rights lawyer.” [25:00] There was always a connection between my mouth and the destiny of African American people. That was another thing that had a profound impact on me.

And the other thing is that I had a rebellious spirit. I was not happy being the typical teenager, being the typical college student. Those things bored me, and I was in search for a larger meaning in life, and the Civil Rights Movement, the Southern Freedom Movement, gave me an opportunity to give voice to some of those, uh – to some of the issues that I was struggling with.

JM: You’ve, um, said elsewhere that –

RS: Let me just add to that.

JM: Yes, please.

RS: In that I had always seen myself as capable of doing exactly what men did in many ways, because I was a champion marble player, I beat them at basketball. And so, I never saw myself as being subservient. And that was an important part of the unwillingness to stay in a small space, which was circumscribed to women. I did not want to be in – merely in that space.

JM: Um-hmm. Can you recall the emotional state, the mood, the perspective you arrived – you had with you when you arrived in Lowndes County? And would that have been in June of '65 or May of '65 or –?

RS: Oh, gosh, the date. That was – Jonathan [Daniels] was killed in '64, wasn't he? No. '65.

JM: No, '65, in August.

RS: It was months before Jonathan was killed.

JM: So, kind of at the end of the school year?

RS: Yes.

JM: May-June?

RS: A little bit before the end of the school year.

JM: Probably May then?

RS: Yes, or even – yes. And I was – once again, while I'm growing, I'm naïve. You have to understand that I didn't come from a hate-filled society. I didn't understand that people could hate you merely because you were black. I had an openness to the world that was devoid of violence, and it was repugnant to me to see anyone hurt another person.

And so, to enter into this world where the first day we went to register people to vote – Stokely Carmichael, Mary Nell Mosely, my friend who had come with me from Tuskegee – and we went down to the courthouse, and the sheriff drew a gun to him and told him he would “blow his nigger brains out.” And Stokely said to him, “Well, hell will be an integrated hell tonight.” And to see someone be able to stand up before a gun – not crying, not afraid, not backing down – touched me deeply and cemented my determination to be a part of this spectacular movement with young people.

And then, I think, what also startled me were the stories that were told by the local people about the violent history of Lowndes County, about it being called “Bloody Lowndes.” I had met black people from the rural South because my grandmother lived there, but because they were my relatives I didn’t pay attention to their bravery and their hospitality. But in Lowndes County I was moved by the hospitality and the bravery of the local people, that they would share the little bit of food that they had with all of us. Mr. Jackson gave us a Freedom House. Clara Mall, one of the young women in the county, risked her life driving us around Lowndes County, all the way to Selma sometimes.

And the community, its graciousness, its willingness to be with the threat of violence every day and to risk much more than I risked, because they risked everything – their children, their houses – because they lived there. And I might have come to Lowndes County with some elitism, but I think that dissolved pretty rapidly, and I developed a lifelong respect for the capacity of ordinary people to do extraordinary things and their willingness, under adverse circumstances, to do it.

JM: Yeah. Can you describe a day, a typical day that summer, you and Mary Nell Mosely doing – building relationships –?

JB: [unintelligible brief remark]

JM: Yeah.

JB: Okay.

JM: Ms. Sales, could you please describe a day doing work in Lowndes County, maybe you and Mary Nell Mosely were out, and what that was like, what you saw?

RS: What we saw, we would [30:00] knock on doors, talk with people, and sometimes we saw poverty that was so extreme. Um, we sometimes saw children who were hungry, needed to be in school but had no shoes. We saw men and women out in the fields, picking cotton and picking cucumbers, and we joined them to pick cucumbers, but I wasn't wanting to pick cotton.

And, uh, we saw, uh, just a community living under the grind and the weight of segregation determined not to be terrorized or intimidated. And so, we saw the community going about its normal business on the one hand, but on the other hand taking care of the immediate and new question of freedom.

JM: Did you feel that – as those first several months went on, did you feel that you were making progress? Did it feel like a successful project to you?

RS: I didn't feel that I was making progress, because it wasn't for me to make the progress. I saw the evolution of local people, moving from where they had once been to where they were going. I saw them executing leadership in mass meetings. I saw them participating in the process of organizing their neighbors to bring them to the move – to the mass meetings. I saw them preparing food so that people could eat. I saw them, uh,

not being afraid when the police would stop them. I saw them, uh, as we were, uh, forced to do, chased, outrun pickup trucks of white men who were chasing us with guns.

So, I never felt it was my project. I never felt it was my goal to meet. I always felt that we were in a collective process, and that no individual drove the process, that there was room for everybody, and everybody had to carry their weight. So, I thought I was carrying my weight, but I certainly was humble enough to know that it wasn't mine to define.

JM: Let me ask you – can you tell me a little bit more, paint a picture of Mrs. McGill, of Mr. Jackson, of John Hewlett, or Clara Mall?

RS: When I met Mr. Hewlett, he was incredible. I thought he was one of the bravest men I'd ever seen. You have to understand that I came from a community where I had never seen an uneducated black man in a leadership position, that in our community to be in that kind of leadership position usually was reserved for college graduates. And Mr. Hewlett was the first person I saw in that kind of position who did not have an education. And the other thing about Mr. Hewlett that really struck me was that every time he said he would be there he showed up. [Bell rings] And that was [bell rings] very, very important, keeping one's word in such violent circumstances.

Clara Mall was like a wild stallion in a very good sense. [Voices in background] She could drive a hundred miles an hour, which she often did.

JM: Excuse me one sec. I'm – I'm sorry.
[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're rolling.

JM: Okay. Um, can I have you make that important point you did about Mr. Hewlett, specifically in relation to he was always there when he said he would be?

RS: He was always there when he said he would be, and he was not a man who demanded the spotlight. He was not a man who insisted on holding the microphone and not letting anyone else speak. He was, in many ways, at the height of sincerity, and I came to trust and rely on him. And we had a connection: his sister had taught me in high school, so we had that little connection. I thought he was the right person at that particular time.

JM: Tell me about Clara Mall.

RS: Clara Mall was my friend, in addition to being a woman who lived in the county, and I often spent the night with them at their house. And she was married with three children but she had an absolute commitment to the Movement. And she and I would do very daring things; um, go into areas to register people to vote where we probably shouldn't have gone. And she was always there with food.

Her grandmother had had – was having a lifetime liaison with one of the richest white men in the county, and she owned a bar. And so, Clara Mall was off-limits to local white mobs. And so, she could tear through the county and do anything she wanted to, and if you were with Clara, you were well protected. And the bar was off-limit. [35:00] And so, we would gather at the bar that her grandmother owned for some Friday night recreation.

Clara was very important. Even Stokely relied on her. Clara was very important to the Movement.

JM: Hmm.

RS: Stop?

JM: Um-hmm.

RS: And Clara was beautiful. And I looked up to her, quite frankly, because of her beauty, her courage, her commitment, and her willingness to do what needed to be done, even at the cost of, you know, possibly being hurt.

JM: Yeah.

RS: And she played an important role in the Movement.

JM: I think Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act on the sixth of August, and it was just a week thereafter, I guess, that, um, the Fort Deposit protest happened.

RS: Yes.

JM: Can you talk a little bit about how that – how that picket was – came into being, because I know that there were, even among the SNCC folks, there were –?

RS: The young people in Fort Deposit, whose parents worked on plantations and were forced to shop at the local store – and because of this, they were often cheated and never realized any profit from the work that they had done all year – and the young people, the young black people, were angry at seeing their parents being cheated. Not only being angry, they were on fire with Movement spirit, and they wanted to play a role in changing things, not only for their parents, but for Alabama and for the nation.

And they suggested – they brought to us a plan where they wanted to do a demonstration. And [laughing] SNCC did not want to do that demonstration. But how do you tell young people who are organizing and stepping forth for the first time – how can you squelch their spirit and say, “Don’t do it”? The reason why we didn’t want to do

it is that, to be perfectly honest, we were frightened, because Fort Deposit was just a nightmare.

And so, we had a great SNCC debate that went on for hours and hours to talk about what we would do. And a part of that debate hinged on the question of Jonathan's participation, Jonathan [Daniels] and Father Morrisroe's participation. And Stokely very much wanted to keep the Movement open to whosoever wanted to come, let them come. He did not want to close out – despite the dangers of black and white together in Lowndes County, he did not want to close out the possibility of Jon's participating. And by then, they had become friends.

I was among the people who said, "No." I said I thought it was too dangerous. I said that I thought it would jeopardize what we were trying to do. And, of course, Stokely's voice and Jonathan's voice, who argued vociferously his position, won the day. And I ended up feeling, "If you're going to segregate the Movement, then why are we here?" And so, I went over to their position after really thinking about the arguments, the genuine arguments that were being made, not grandstanding arguments, not exploitative arguments, but genuine arguments that came from democratizing the Movement and holding to that vision of democratization.

So, having made that decision, we all participated in the demonstration, which took place on Saturday morning. And when we got there, it was [pause] one of the most frightening scenes I've ever seen. It was a mob. There was a mob of white men there, and I guess, being a mob, you're undisciplined. And they had every conceivable weapon: baseball bats, garbage pails, anything it seems that they could lay their hands on, they had. And they were threatening to beat us up, kill us, and as the day – as the time wore

on, they were getting louder and less willing to hold back the violence that they threatened to unleash.

And I think – I'm not sure – [40:00] that we were probably arrested not only because they did not, uh, approve of what we were doing, but also somewhere I think that they realized that if they didn't get us out of there, we were going to get killed. So, we – by "they," I mean the white officials – we were put on a garbage can –

JM: Truck.

RS: Truck, right. [Laughs] Put on a garbage truck and we were taken to the jail in Hayneville, men on one floor and women on the other floor, and held in the most barbaric conditions that you could imagine, with the threats – the women being threatened, especially women with big mouths who wouldn't shut up singing, of being raped by the trustees, and by the sheriff threatening to have the black men trustees rape us in the same way that they had beat Fannie Lou Hamer when she was in jail, not raped her but beat her.

And the other thing, I got very sick in jail. I began to develop an ulcer, and my stomach was just on fire. And I was begging to see a doctor and, of course, that didn't happen. Jonathan and I were passing notes to each other. By then, we had become very good friends. Jonathan was – they were passing – actually, I knew Jonathan before that time. I knew him in Selma, because we went to Montgomery together. By that time, I felt like, "If I don't get out of jail, I'm going to die." I felt so sick. But, of course, I didn't die.

And while Jonathan was in jail, ESCRU [Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity], John Morris, came with Episcopalians to suggest that he could get out of

jail, and Jon refused. When we were finally let out, the jailer just came one day and said, “Get out of here. You’re free.”

JM: It’s a week later, seven days.

RS: Yes. It scared me to death. Now, all of this is instinct. I knew that when people let you out of jail like that that they’ve got something planned, because that’s what had happened to Goodman, Schwerner, and [Chaney] – and so, I knew instinctively, but I couldn’t document it, uh, that something was up. And – but we went nonetheless, with great protest, because they said if we didn’t get out of jail, once again they started threatening us. And I said, “This is really a change, people threatening you if you don’t get out of jail.” [Laughs]

Anyway, so we went to the corner store. And I’ve been wrestling with this, and I’ve never said this before. I’ve been wrestling with what happened, and one of the things – somebody in that group suggested that Jon, Father Morrisroe, Joyce, and myself go and get sodas. I’ve been trying to think of that voice recently, because I think that’s very important. Um, had that person not said that, we probably would not have gone to that store. Maybe we would have, but I’m not sure we would have gone as a group, for the group.

And when we – now, Willie Vaughn says that he saw – when we were walking to the store, he told us that there was a man with a gun at the store. This is – I’ve been recently trying to figure out if he said that. I don’t remember it. And if there was a man at the store, and he had been there with a gun, why wasn’t he shot? These are later questions that I began to ask myself in the last year, uh, as I began to understand some of the under dynamics that were happening in the Movement that I was not aware of.

JM: Can you say who Willie Vaughn was in this context?

RS: Willie Vaughn had come to Alabama from Mississippi.

JM: [Clears throat] [Okay].

RS: Yes. And we got to the store, and Tom Coleman was standing in the door, and he had a gun. And it's one of these moments where you're there, but you're not there. You're sort of stopped in your footsteps, but you're trying to figure out how to move. And he said, "Bitch," because I'm [popping sound and change in sound level] – I was in the front. [Sound level returns] He said, "Bitch, I'll blow your brains out." And the next thing I knew, I was pulled backwards and I fell, literally fell.

And [45:00] Jonathan – I heard a shot, and it was Jonathan. He shot Jonathan. Jonathan never made a sound. I think he was dead instantly or in a coma instantly. Father Morrisroe, who was with us, the Catholic priest who had literally just come to the South when Martin Luther King issued the call, [pause] held onto Joyce Bailey's hands, a local young girl, seventeen years old, who had been in jail. And they were running together, and the next thing I knew, there was another shot. And, unlike Jonathan, Father Morrisroe began to emit moans and begging for water.

And Joyce Bailey, with some level of consciousness still working, headed that way and went around the – in the South you always have these cars [nb: additional unintelligible word?] – went around to those empty cars and called my name. And it was when I could hear her that I realized that I wasn't dead. Prior to that, I thought I was dead. I had no sense that Jonathan was dead. But I got up on my knees – not got up – I got on my knees and crawled over to Joyce, and we ran over to the area where the civil rights workers, where the southern freedom workers still remained.

And Jimmie Rogers, Gloria Larry, Ruby Sales, and Joyce Bailey went back over to try to give Father Morrisroe water. And Tom Coleman, like a wild man, was flinging his gun and saying he would blow our brains out if we tried to give – if we didn't leave. He let that man lay down there in the hot August sun, shot, begging for water, and threatened to kill anybody who helped him. We dispersed and ran in different directions.

And somehow I got back to the Freedom House. And when Stokely Carmichael and Silas Norman, who was the project director of Selma, Alabama – when Silas Norman and Stokely heard what had happened, they went downtown. And when they got there, the streets were clean, and Jonathan and Father Morrisroe were missing.

Now, it wasn't a simple thing of knowing where they went. For several days, the SNCC office, Ruby Doris Smith, tried to find out where they were, and nobody would tell us. So, not only was Jonathan dead, he was also missing. And they talked with John Doar of the FBI – I mean of the Justice Department, sorry – and trying to – and Mrs. – you can imagine his mother not knowing where he was. And finally, they located the morgue where Jonathan was and the hospital where Father Morrisroe was.

Now, I don't know if you've heard the story of – Father Morrisroe's story.

JM: [Coughs] Excuse me.

RS: But he was taken to the hospital in a hearse on top of Jonathan's dead body and laid in the hospital hallway for hours before anybody would operate on him, until a general, I think, or a major in the U.S. Army [phone rings] agreed to do that.

JM: Just a moment. [Phone rings]

RS: So, of course, by then, we've gotten our first real lesson of southern white murder. And we are young; nobody's over twenty-two. We are impressionable. We

know the horrors of segregation, but we're also hopeful. [50:00] We're also optimistic. And that's a defining moment, another defining moment, um, and we were shattered and devastated and trying to make sense out of the loss of our friend Jon and knowing that we had to go to the funeral – but somehow finding it hard to face his mother because he was with us. We had not done it, but we felt a great responsibility for each other, and so that was very, very hard to do that.

And, of course, my story is known that after then I just became – went from a big-mouthed person to someone who rarely spoke. And I think I spent a great deal of my adult life, without even knowing it, trying to find my voice again, um, trying to be full-voiced again. Uh, because, um, I shut down in ways that I didn't realize it, like with many movement people, and the reason why I shut down is, even when I was at Princeton, even when I was at Manhattanville, even when I was out in the world doing peace and justice work, I never told anybody I'd been in the Movement. I never talked about that, so traumatized was I.

JM: You went home.

RS: Yes.

JM: In the interim, and then back to Hayneville to testify.

RS: Yes, yes.

JM: What was it – do you remember your visit to your home in that interim?

RS: Oh, yes, I remember my visit. My parents were very supportive and – well, my mother was hanging out wash one day, and some white men came there and told her in the backyard that if I testified, they would kill me. [Pause] And not – despite that, she did not say, "Don't testify." She *never* said, "Don't testify."

JM: Oh. Did anybody from federal law enforcement – Justice Department, FBI – speak to you about going to testify? Offer any –?

RS: Vaguely, but I don't remember. I remember John Doar talking about the wheels of justice move very slowly. That's what I remembered out of all of that.

JM: Yeah, yeah. What was your experience when you went back to Hayneville to testify?

RS: Obviously, I was frightened, but had the resilience of my grandmother and my mother and my father. And I was determined, as much as they didn't want me to testify, I was determined to testify. And I was also belligerently, in the sense that I refused to be intimidated, um, was not going to let him make a verbal fool out of me.

JM: "He" being Coleman's defense attorney?

RS: The lawyer. Yes. And determined to meet him word-for-word and not be afraid, even when I walked in the courtroom, and, and, and, and people – and this guy made some threat, uh, in the courtroom. The hostility hung like icicles in the courtroom. And so, it was a not a good place for a young person to be. Uh, I was in the face of one of the, I understand, greatest lawyers in Alabama history. And there I was, a child and standing up against those forces. And my colleagues standing in the rain all day, because they wouldn't allow us to go to the witness room, treating us like cattle. And I testified.

JM: Coleman's attorney, um, made no – was not the least bit shy about attempting to frame your and Jonathan Daniels's relationship in a certain way, insinuating that you were –

RS: Having a sexual relationship?

JM: Yeah.

RS: Well, more – it wasn't a relationship. He insinuated that I was a whore, and that Jonathan, like white men in the South, was sleeping with his whore, and that the testimony – that Jonathan's character was expressed in the color of the underwear that he wore. Um, I think he wore bright-colored underwear. And, um, basically, he tried to hinge the case around, um, ironically, [55:00] something that the South never wanted to admit but knew that it was there, [laughing] and that's what he tried to build his case on, the unspoken truth.

But, of course, Jonathan and I were not having a relationship. Of course, I wasn't a whore. Of course, I was not sleeping in the movement, despite the, the – what has later become Movement mythology. I was, you know, despite all of my rebellion, I was a woman from Columbus, Georgia. [Laughing] I was a seventeen-year-old. And so, I was not from a liberal North, where people might do that. Um, and so, it was very shocking, but I was sophisticated enough to know what he was trying to do.

JM: Had you harbored even a sliver of hope that the verdict might go the other way?

RS: Um-um.

JM: You just considered that a foregone conclusion?

RS: I thought that people would act how they had already – always acted and I had no evidence that they were going to depart from history.

JB: Could we pause for a minute?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: Ms. Sales, amidst this trauma and horror of August and [loud muffled microphone sounds] through to the trial, um, [pause] was there anything about that

experience that caused you to fundamentally reconsider your commitment to nonviolent social protest?

RS: I had never thought about anything but nonviolence, and that remained the same for me. I didn't like killing. I – and even when some part of the movement shifted to taking up arms, I was never a part of that, because the idea of killing was always repugnant to me. So, it reaffirmed the righteousness of nonviolence and what happens when you use guns and other instruments of death.

JM: I'd like to talk about all of the history you've just described in terms of long and complex aftermath. And maybe we can – we can organize that in a couple of ways. One is to think about, um, all the implications in the long aftermath for you personally, and then also for the county and the folks of Lowndes County. Let me start with that second first. Um, you've said that the, uh, the killing, the wounding of Father Morrisroe, the trial, the acquittal, did not in fact, uh, uh, defeat the movement in the county.

RS: No, it did not defeat the movement. Uh, you must realize that black people in Lowndes County, by virtue of the name "Bloody Lowndes," had lived with violence for generations, white violence, and did not and would not give up. So, they continued as they'd always done. And because we were in the middle of movement fervor and commitment and a special time in history, the commitment was solidified rather than weakened.

We had not only the commitment, but the collective grief of losing Jonathan, bound us together in the county. And instead of retreating because of that, people were even more determined to move forward. Stokely was even more determined to move forward. Silas Norman was even more determined to move forward. I was even more

determined to move forward. So, it did not frighten us, as it had been – as it had intended to do.

JM: Um-hmm. Can you describe Tent City, as it emerged in '96 – in '66, excuse me?

RS: Yes. It was, uh, basically, uh, ordinary sharecroppers being kicked off of their land for registering to vote and the community deciding that even that, which historically might have created a different response, but in this dynamic movement process, they decided that they would make homes, that they have Tent City, that they would live in tents and, um, and *still* move forward the Movement, that they would not be controlled by economic, um, penalties. Um, I think that the whole notion of Tent City that grew up in Washington, D.C., um, under Abernathy, had its roots in Lowndes County.

The other point that I want to make about this whole Tent City, [1:00:00] which is all part of what I call the Second Indigenous Southern Freedom Movement, the First Indigenous Movement being the runaway slave movement, um, and so, because it was an indigenous movement, whatever people had they brought to the table to make Tent City possible and to, uh, carry forward the Movement. That could not have happened if just a bunch of people had come in, college students had come in and said they wanted to have a movement, and that statement was out of concert with the, with the will of the people and the desire of the people. So, what was *absolutely* important about this time was that we were in common accord around a shared vision, and that vision extended beyond age, beyond, uh, well, class, and beyond, uh, religious denomination. And Tent City survived because the community made it survive.

But homelessness, the threat of homelessness, had *always* been the threat, whether you were kicked off a plantation, whether you were kicked out of your home. Whites had *always* used this as a means of social control. So, that was very much within the context of that white history of trying to maintain white prerogatives.

JM: [Clears throat] I've –

RS: And, of course, you know Stokely was very essential to Tent City, and people – out of Tent City emerged the Black Panther symbol. Yes. And the whole – uh, you know, growing simultaneously was the vision of building another party, uh, and being more successful than what had happened with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, having learned some important lessons.

JM: I think it will be 1970 when the county elects a black sheriff in Lowndes County.

RS: Yes, John Hewlett. Yes.

JM: Yeah. Um, let me ask about those next couple of years for you. Um, what – did you participate in a speaking tour?

RS: I participated in a speaking tour. That was that summer, I think, and early into the fall. And then, the question was what to do next. I went down for a little while into, uh, Albany and worked with Charlie Sherrod. I don't know if he remembers that.

Um, but after everybody left Lowndes County, Stokely and other people who had been essential to the Movement, I resettled myself in Washington, D.C., with Jean Wiley, and went to New York and lived in James Baldwin's apartment – he was away for the summer – and became very involved with the feminist movement and trying to stay in a college long enough to get my degree. But really expanding my consciousness, not only

in terms of the United States, but the global world, and trying to attend to the deep hurt that I felt around Jonathan Daniels's death and wrestling with the question: how do I wear this label, 'The Girl that Jonathan Saved,' with some dignity that did not take away the fact that Jonathan saved my life but required me to have a life beyond that?

JM: For several decades now you've worked in, um, a range of contexts to do social justice activism and organizing and educating. Um, I want to start with a – as we touch on that work, I want to start with – can you talk a little bit about, um, your perspective on the ways that – even here, our team from the Museum arrives, talking about a Civil Rights Movement Project, rather than a Southern Freedom Movement Project. Can you talk a little bit about the way you've conceptualized these?

RS: Yes. I think that, um, I prefer to call it, in retrospect, the Southern Freedom Movement, because it was not only a movement for civil rights, but it was also a movement for human dignity. It was also a movement to abolish the violence and terrorism that whites executed against black people for more than a hundred years during segregation. It was also a movement that – where we wanted to move from the small spaces that segregation pressed us down into [1:05:00] into larger spaces that gave us expression: creative, political, and social expression.

And the reason why I say it was a Southern Freedom Movement, on the other hand, is that the results of this movement not only humanized black people but it had the possibility of opening up the world for white people so that they could lead a more meaningful life. And I – the other part about being a movement is that this was not an event. This was a dynamic process that was connected to many events that had happened in the black community, like the student movement, uh, the Southern Negro Youth

Cooperative in the 1940s. So, we just didn't spring up out of nowhere. And so that, the other part about the Southern Freedom Movement is that there was a direct connection between the aims of southern black education and the ultimate explosion of the Southern Freedom Movement.

And I think that when you limit it to "civil rights," you obscure, first of all, the horrors of segregation. You do not have to come to terms with the violence. You do not have to come to terms with the economic oppression. You do not have to come to terms with white people who wanted to turn black schools into plantations. You do not have to come to terms with the fact that no black girl was safe from rape in that society. *No black girl was safe from rape in that society.* You obscure all of that. And, at the same time, you obscure the long hard years of black struggle and the blood and the sacrifice that we have poured into that struggle. I think that it does not do justice by limiting it to – and it's really not *accurate* to limit it to the Movement.

And one other point I want to make about that is that, when we look at Rosa Parks, people often think that she was – she did that because of her civil rights and wanting to sit down on the bus. But she also did that – it was a rebellion of maids, a rebellion of working class women, who were tired of boarding the buses in Montgomery, the public space, and being assaulted and called out-of-there names and abused by white bus drivers.

And that's why that Movement could hold so long. If it had just been merely a protest about riding the bus, it might have shattered. But it went to the very heart of black womanhood, and black women played a major role in sustaining that movement. And so, that's why I think it's really important to see the larger context. I don't think a

civil rights movement could have lasted as long as this movement did without the cultural nuances of God, without the theology, without the intimacy, without the connections, and without the strong desire to be first-class human beings.

[Someone coughs]

JM: I want to ask about ways in which, uh, American society – black and white, others, the complex communities that even those terms, in summary, can't begin to represent – and think about the way we look back on this history and the way it's written. And I know that you had, uh, uh, a very specific kind of experience when you were in graduate school in U.S. history, and I'm very interested in your thoughts about the narratives of American history, about the narratives of this period as they were written by professional historians then and now, and how you –

RS: Well, I believe that they were narratives where whites dominated the story. And they were narratives that started from a very faulty assumption: that black people were second-class human beings. Because they didn't understand that you could be in a school that lacked facilities, you could be in an unjust school system, but that didn't mean that you had a second-class mind. They did not understand the roots and nature of the southern culture, and they did not infuse within the narratives the stories and the work of ordinary people, like Vanessa Siddle Walker's book, *Hello Professor*, really talks about, that black people built this network across regions, states in the South, that connected them in a project to advance the black community through education.

There is – there was very little understanding of black people as having any traits [1:10:00] beyond deficits and pathology. So, the argument always started from the deficits and always saw us as the extension of that which white men had made rather

than, as Ralph Ellison says, “What we had made out of the ashes of segregation.” And so, that was really the problem with the narratives.

And oftentimes people who wrote the narratives had very little understanding of the culture that they were writing. For example, they often talked about Martin Luther King being influenced by his time at Crozer [Theological Seminary] and his time at BU [Boston University]. But the truth of the matter is, while he might have learned a lot there, he knew that in order to be a leader, he had to use what he had grown up with, the cultural resources. So, when he preached, he didn’t use the symbols that he had learned at BU. He talked about God as being a lily of the valley, a bright and morning star, a shelter in a raging storm, a way out of no way; he was testifying with the people. But historians didn’t understand that, and they saw him as the exceptional Negro.

There was no exceptionality in the South. No matter what you accomplished, you were black. Even if you were a college president, like Mordecai Johnson, you couldn’t vote. So, the culture of exceptionality did not exist in the South. It existed in the North. Black students were not plucked out of their communities at an early age and put into white schools where they developed a distance and, in many ways, a contempt for ordinary black people.

The South was very different. We shared a tremendous intimacy. Nobody talks about that the Movement happened because of the intimacy that we shared. No one talks about how what did knowing mean in that, uh, southern freedom, uh, culture. Very little is understood about that.

JM: Um-hmm.

RS: And I think that we really have to begin to rethink the kind of questions that we ask, and the kind – who it is that we use to document what we’re saying, and why was this movement particularly a southern movement. Not because it was located in the South. Not because it was – beyond the fact that it was located in the South, it was segregated. It also has to do with the *southern* culture. I brought to the Movement a certain understanding of the world that was greatly shaped by growing up in the South. Bernice Johnson Reagon brought to the Movement *all* of what she had learned as a southern black girl. And that’s very important.

And that learning *kept* us, despite our disagreements, connected to the generations, because we sang the same songs and prayed the same prayer. And even when we thought black people were praying too much, our older people were praying too much, we still knew the prayers enough to say, “Amen.” And that’s what kept us connected.

JM: Let me ask you to say one more thing about that theme of intimacy that you mentioned.

RS: Well, I think what segregation did is that you are bound together and you know each other, not only through blood, but through the common experience. And the community is a closed society where you know each other from Columbus, Georgia, to Washington, D.C.. And because black people could not stay in hotels, we had to stay with other black people when we traveled. So, it was a culture of intimacy where we shared not only the common experience, but we shared the same songs, the same stories, the same relatives. We were locked into this intimacy.

And the intimacy manifested itself where a person could say to you, “I’m going to tell your mother if you don’t sit down.” And you sat down, because you know she had the cachet to tell your parents that. So, we were greatly intimate through the school, through the churches, through social clubs, through associations, and through the playground.

JM: Hmm.

RS: The playground has not gotten its place in history about a gathering place that was a training ground for young people to come together.

JM: Hmm.

RS: The playground was very essential.

JM: Hmm. Let me ask about language. And two specific instances suggest, I think, a larger attention to language and the power of language that you were very careful about. At the trial, before the defense attorney – he wanted to [clears throat] – he wanted to refer to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee as SNCC [pronounced “snick”].

RS: Yes.

JM: That’s one example. Another is in graduate school at Princeton. You were careful to use the term “enslavement –”

RS: Yes. [1:15:00]

JM: And not “slavery.” So, I’d like you to reflect a little bit about how you think about those issues.

RS: Well, to the lawyer who wanted to call SNCC “snick,” I responded, because that was a way of denigrating, that he didn’t have the intimacy to call SNCC “snick,” that

that was an intimate term, that – and out of respect in this formal setting – he needed to give us the honor of being the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and not reduce us to, uh, terminology that I felt like he had no right to have access to. And so, it was a way of putting him in his place, because I thought oftentimes white people want to walk over into cultural territories and claim it in ways that they shouldn't. And so, that –

And in “enslavement,” I had a – I was an American – I was a history major, and Slavery, Reconstruction, and Abolition were my periods. And one of the things – several things: I had just left the South, and I knew that black people were not Sambos, or we couldn't have ever had a movement where we changed the South without firing a shot. Sambos don't do that.

And the other thing is that “enslavement” almost seems as if black people passively submitted to being – I mean “slaves,” not “enslavement,” excuse me – and it didn't say that there was somebody putting them in this place. And so, it really obscured the presence and nature of enslavement: who was doing it. And also, when you say, “Master,” that's a very benign term that really gives credibility and honor to someone who is an enslaver.

So, I began to really wrestle with those terminologies *in the desire* to have a true telling of enslavement. And I didn't like “Mid-Atlantic Passage,” because it sounded like people went on a vacation, and it didn't document the brutality, the captivity, the pain, the rape, all of those things that – the disassociation, never to see your mother again, never to see your grandmother again, never to hear the drums beating in the village, never to hear the sound of your own name again. I don't think that was a Mid-Atlantic Passage.

And so, I started thinking, and I could not have done that had I not been in the Movement.

JM: [Clears throat] In 2005, I think, or thereabouts [coughs] –

RS: One thing I want to say about that.

JM: Please.

RS: One of the things that bothered me about, uh, about history is that rarely is there an obvious subject doing the deed. Um, and so that you never say, “White men did this.” Uh, the only subjects are oppressed people. You say, “Black people,” but the white men as subjects, uh, are rarely present, so you would say, “The, uh, black people were compelled by the institution of slavery,” but you never say who compelled them. And so, that was another thing, trying to make people be subjects and have some existentialist responsibility for the deeds that they created, [speaking quietly] which was a tall order at Princeton.

JM: [Laughs] Um, I want to talk about memory, history and memory, and implications of that. In 2005, I think it was, you went back to Lowndes County for a public event.

RS: Um-hmm.

JM: And it involved – it was an open public event. Um, there were relatively few whites who attended, uh, perhaps almost – very – I mean, perhaps just very few, one perhaps.

RS: Right.

JM: And in a prior telling of that episode that I’ve read of yours, um, you said a range of very interesting things about memory.

RS: I think that we live in a society where part of the way that those in power maintain power is through dis-memory and revisionist history. And I think that, unfortunately, we live in an era where even black people suffer from dis-memory around the Southern Freedom Movement, because if I can create reality through dis-memory then I can distort who you are, and tell you who you are, and tell you who you've been with each other. And not only that, I can wipe my hands free of the blood. And what, for example, [1:20:00] in the south – people believed that the government gave them jobs, when you talk about the Southern Freedom Movement. There's no connection between how they got those jobs and the blood and sweat and the constant struggle – even up against the government for those jobs.

And not only that, we live in a post-racial world that has tried to wipe out the meaning of whiteness and have distorted the discourse where black people, when we say something is racist, we're the predators, and white people are the innocent victims. And that comes about because of dis-memory. And what I call stealing history. Not only – because it's not just dis-memory, when you make yourself the good guy in the story and black people the villain, and you eradicate our place in history, then you've also stolen history. And I think that that has been an important nature of European history, and European-American history.

And I also think that with that memory you could execute the culture wars that have been existing – executed in the last forty years that targeted the strongholds of African American survival: turning liberation theology in the black church into the “prosperity gospel”; tearing down black schools, as David Cecelski points out in his book; um, fragmenting the relationship between black students and black teachers and

principals that had been part of the reality for more than one hundred years and putting them in classrooms where eighty-five percent of the teachers are white, in a situation where between 1950 and 1962, 38,000 African American teachers were fired in thirteen southern states. All of these actions create dis-memory, and we are here today because of that dis-memory.

Nobody remembers that Carver High School in 1968, the year my brother graduated, had seven National Merit Scholars in a segregated school of two hundred and some students. So what you then say is that black students are criminals; you criminalize black youth. And you make the world believe that they are the biggest drug addicts, when the statistics show that blacks – that while we are the largest number in jail, we are not the largest number – users of drugs. White people are. And so – and I think, in terms of memory, it's important to ultimately remember as it relates to struggle that black people did not come all the way a hundred years through the veil of segregation to get one seat in the white house. That was *not* the destination. The destination was to advance democracy in America in a way that not only improved the lives of black people but also the lives of all people in society. And we were not wanting to be, in a real sense, the king.

JM: John, can we pause just one second?

JB: We're on.

JM: Um, Ms. Sales, let me ask a little bit about a—about another issue that, uh, we've all witnessed unfold across several decades now, and it's the extraordinary rate of jailings of African American men, in particular – women, though, too. I'm interested in your thoughts and perspective on that.

RS: I think when the discourse shifted in this revisionist climate that criminalized African American people, most particularly men, I think it opened the door to build the prison industrial complex because nobody cared that thugs and gangsters and people who are not – uncivilized people – ended up in jail. Nobody even sees them as young people; nobody even sees them as people with possibilities. So when the economic system of sharecropping collapsed, white people in the South came up with another system, which is really a plantation system, where these young men are in jail working for major corporations. And for sometimes less [1:25:00] than a dollar a day.

And not only that, I see a correlation between the corporation, the coalition – let me just say that I think one of the things white southerners did through the attacks on liberalism and the North was to position their culture – create an environment that positioned the public consciousness to accept southern culture and values. And so, of greed, materialism, anti-intellectualism, *all* of the things that held together segregation; you could not be a true intellectual and really be curious and really struggle for truth in a punitive segregated society. So that I think that the very things that held together segregation are the things that hold together the prison industrial complex.

And I think not – we must understand what happened to the liberal North, because the liberal North was also the victim of a culture war, and the South said, “We might have not won the Civil Rights or the Southern Freedom Movement war, but we’re darn sure going to win the culture wars.” And they did. And so at some point in the ‘80s you could hardly make a distinction between a southern politician and a northern politician because they had been galvanized around the same issue of whiteness. The other thing that I think is very, very important as we look at this – this whole conversation of

struggle, is how do we in the 21st century, talk about these human rights issues with a lot of understanding of a technocracy, where only a few people matter, and the rest are collateral damage no matter what the color is. So that's why you have an increase in white poverty; that's why many white males are obsolete in today's world and instead of understanding technocracy, an anti-human technocracy, they blame other people, and they believe that they are in the presence of dangerous black men who pose a threat to the order of society and need to be locked up.

And they don't have a *clue* as to this culture war that has been – that raged, not only to diminish the gains of the Movement but to destroy the New Deal, the gains of the New Deal, where Joseph Kennedy ironically put a cap on corporate greed and the way in which they acted in the world. Now it's boundless. It knows no limits. And so that this is – we do not live in a post-racial world. We live in a world actually where race and class both are common denominators in many – in ways that they were not earlier, because industrialism had brought us spaces; technocracy is much more limiting. And there is no place for these young men. This is what I am trying to say. They're meaningless. They're collateral damage and they are considered human waste, as Jacques Ellul talks about – people being human waste in a technocracy.

So this is where we are, and that, like the South, which was very fascist because only one voice could go forward, whether it was in the newspaper, whether it was in the public pulpit. We are moving toward that fascist culture, and it comes out of the heartbeat of southern politicians.

JM: Hmm. You've –

RS: Coalition of southern people.

JM: You've – you've worked very actively to engage these issues in a host of contexts. Let me ask you about, about Spirit House and maybe we could conclude today with some – I'd love to have you describe your work with Spirit House.

RS: Spirit –

JM: Which you founded.

RS: Yes, which I founded. Spirit House comes from the understanding that social justice is what we do. It informs who we are on the inside and how we live on the outside. And the Greek word for “spirit” – and so that, it's “breath.” And so Spirit House is really about how we live, what we take in, and what we put out – how we live in relations to each other – in relationship to each other. It is our breath. It is our *whole* selves, integrated and operating [1:30:00]– in terms of relationality. But it's also, in a more simpler term, it's about dealing with issues of education, economics, racial justice, and we bring people of all colors together to work on these issues.

And right now, for the last two years, we have been dealing with the counter-culture of education, and what might we learn from that counter-culture during segregation that would enable black students not to be victims in public schools today. And one of the things that disturbed me so tremendously – and this is about narrative again: these southern black teachers created outstanding students and leaders. And many of them still exist. And no one has bothered to ask them, “How did you do it? What might we learn from you? What were your strategies? How did you, uh, deal with complicated situations? How did you invigorate young people to believe that they could make a difference even when the white world said that they couldn't.”

We've been trying to get that conversation on the table. And we've been trying to make a connection between public schooling and the survival of HBCU's, which are – many now are being under the gun for being folded into white colleges that are not doing well. Many of these white colleges are mediocre colleges that, once again, need resources from black people – so taking black people's resources to enhance white schools.

JM: Thank you so much for spending this afternoon with us. And um, it's really an honor to be with you to share this discussion. Thank you.

RS: Thank you very much for being here, and it's been great being with both of you.

JM: Thank you.

[Recording ends at 1:32:09]

END OF INTERVIEW