

Interviewee: Sue Thrasher

Interviewer: Jessie Wilkerson

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[Laughter]

Sue Thrasher: Yeah, yeah. Well, it certainly – there are many moments when I'm reminded of that. Actually, a friend to me said this morning – I was saying I needed to have someone else work with me on something, so I asked a guy and then I got very frustrated because of the process. And she said, “No, no, if you need to work collectively, then go find other women [laughs] to work collectively with.” So. But –

Jessie Wilkerson: Are you recording already?

Videographer(?): I just started, so if you want to –

JW: Okay.

ST: The panel was frustrating, very frustrating to me, because I think Bob [Zellner], the chair of the panel, had his own agenda that he needed to talk about. And I think this actually is a good place for him to talk about his feelings about some of these things, and it's good to get that out, but I don't think the panel was the right place for it. And so, I think it just felt – actually it felt all over the place to me, and not a good discussion on organizing in the white community. And I will take my role, my share of accountability for that, because I felt like, in the little time that I had, I was sort of rushing through and felt like at the end I'd only given specific things rather than talk

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about the bigger questions, which I knew that I wanted to get to – and to raise bigger questions, not to answer them.

And I think, at the end, there were a lot questions asking what we would do and what advice we had to give about organizing, and I really wanted someone on the panel to say, “We can’t do that.” And I actually would have quoted what Charles Payne on a different panel said this morning, “We can’t tell people what to do now. What we can do is talk to them about the culture that we created that enabled us to do the things we did then, the community of support, you know, all of those things. And we can help people understand that *that* was really what enabled us to do those things.”

No one could have gone into Mississippi without that community and without that passion and that sense of struggle. And I think those are really the only things you can tell people that they need to have. The specifics of organizing and doing those things, it’s not for us to say, for sure.

JW: Um-hmm. Well, do you want to say a little bit about the bigger questions or concerns that you thought you wanted to raise?

ST: Yeah, well, I think the question is, when you talk about organizing white people, for what purpose? That’s the first one. And I could have framed SSOC [Southern Students Organizing Committee] in that way, because the purpose for that really was, first of all, solidarity with the civil rights movement, and two, building that bridge to get people entry into the civil rights movement. And I think at that historical moment, both of those things were exactly what they should have been.

But SSOC had, within its short existence, it had at least three different lives. And two years later, with the Vietnam War raging and the antiwar movement really gaining

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steam around the country, that would have been a different – there would have been a different answer to that question. But in '64, at least that was my answer. I don't know that it was the organizational answer. But I think all of the people gathered in Nashville in '64 felt like – is there a bug in my hair?

JW: I don't see anything. [Laughter]

ST: I think that in [19]64 that it really was just a very simple idea that you could organize white students to be supportive of the civil rights movement and bring them into the movement. And that was a good idea, I thought. [Knock]

Videographer: We'll just pause for a second.

JW: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JW: ...larger concerns or questions of organizing.

ST: Right. The first question when you talk about organizing in the white community, I think, is for what purpose and with whom and whether or not you're trying to build a multicultural coalition, so that you're organizing not just white people, or whether you're doing issue-organizing where it's the women's movement, the peace movement, the environmental justice movement, the jobs for justice movement. So, I think there – you know, to talk about white organizing, you need to have a context for what you're talking about, and I think that would have been an important framework to have the conversation this afternoon.

And we also talked – you know, we were talking historically, and so to talk about the specific models we were talking about and not raise those questions does leave a lot of things on the table about how you do this and so forth.

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I do have to say when I heard Harry Belafonte today at lunch – did either of you hear him? Oh, my goodness! He gave this most amazingly beautiful speech that started out by saying, “You guys are here talking about the past, and you’re not talking about what should be done now.” And he really laid down a challenge to everyone in the room in the most beautiful way. And I have to say I was sitting there, thinking, “Oh, my God, does this mean that with my bad knees I have to go out and start organizing people [in a] Tea Party? I can’t do this!” [Laughter] But it really was sort of a call to action in a wonderful, wonderful way.

But I think, you know, how to do that is just not for us old folks to answer, which is not to say that we should not be actively involved in doing things, but the leadership has to come from somewhere else at this point, I think. And certainly not telling other people what to do, or telling young people what to do would be insane.

JW: Okay. Well, can we move on a little bit to your later work with the Institute for Southern Studies?

ST: Oh, sure!

JW: I know you’ve talked about SNCC and SSOC.

ST: No one ever asks me about that. [Laughter]

JW: Could you first say what to you were the goals of the Institute and how you came to begin that program?

ST: Probably one of the risks I take in doing these interviews is that it’s going to come out sooner or later that I did not have a deep political analysis, that I was really operating under instinct and a sense of what was the right thing to do, and it was the same

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thing. Certainly that was true when I began working in SSOC, and it was certainly true with the Institute for Southern Studies.

And this wasn't – I did this in conversation with other people, with Julian Bond, in particular, and Howard Romaine. So, this was never – I never felt like it was a singular idea. But I think we all felt that we wanted to keep this movement alive and that, in order to keep this movement alive, we needed to start going more in depth and start doing some research on the South and develop information. And at that point, I think I fully believed that if you gave information to people, that if you developed the information and gave it to people, then they would be so outraged by the information that they would act.

And it wasn't until ten years later at Highlander when I realized that that's not the way – that's not going to ever work. And I think we put together some great information through the Institute for Southern Studies. And I think we were really floundering around a lot during the first year, because we were beginning to have some seminars, we were beginning to do some research. And then Bob Hall arrived and had this idea of doing the journal *Southern Exposure*, and I think that really helped structure the research and the educational way we were thinking about it. So, I think that was where we had sort of been in a little bit of a muddle during the first year, because we didn't have that worked-out sense.

And I think you can go two ways about that. You can go the way Myles Horton said when he started Highlander: You move into a place and you start and you let the environment shape what you're doing. And certainly I think that's a little bit what we did with *Southern Exposure*, with the Institute of Southern Studies. We moved into Atlanta.

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We had a room. We began inviting people to seminars. We had great good luck that first year. One of the first things that happened was that Gunnar Myrdal was in town, and we somehow or other snagged him to come over to the Institute and do a seminar. How lucky is that?

JW: Um-hmm.

ST: And then Daniel Ellsberg was in town. And so, just having those two people be in your conference room was really – got attention, at least. But I think the organization really came around when we started doing the journal and then, later, really thinking seriously about the oral histories and the “No More Moaning” issue.

JW: Um-hmm. Well, I want to ask you about the oral histories, but first I think it’s interesting that you got involved with Gunnar Myrdal, or that you were able to meet him. So, in a way, it wasn’t just an extension of SNCC, but it was looking even further back. So, how do you think – can you describe that, how it was, in some ways, an extension of SNCC or SSOC, but how it was doing different things, as well?

ST: The Institute, you mean?

JW: Yeah.

ST: I think by that point the conversation that we were having is that we wanted to keep working in the movement, but that the form of the movement was clearly already changing. But I think also, and I don’t know whether I’ve written about this before or just thought it or said it, but [knock] I think we thought there would be a movement. Shall we stop?

Videographer: You can keep going. I’ll just go [out and check].

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ST: Okay. I think we thought that we were doing research for a movement that would be there, and then I think, within a year, that had drastically changed, because the movement had really changed in phenomenal ways by the late 1960s, early 1970s. So, there wasn't an identifiable movement in the same way there had been when we started the conversations about the Institute and probably even during that first year.

So, we were generating information and reports, but there was no one out there to use them. I think that's the other thing that's important, and I think part of our assumption was that we would generate this information and then it would be used by people who were activists in organizing and so forth. But it wasn't clear who that was in the early 1970s. The movement as *we* knew it had disappeared. I think there was a movement; I just think it was really going in many different directions at that time, one important one being the women's movement.

JW: Um-hmm. Well, can you talk about how you began to delve into oral history? What led you to think that oral history was a good way of thinking about the past and documenting these things?

ST: Well, I think it was Anne Braden saying to me, "You don't know. If you want – you think you're the first generation of activists and you should go find people who have done what you've done before." And, in the beginning, I didn't think of it as doing oral history. I thought about finding my roots or finding people who were more like me who had done something generations earlier, a few generations earlier. So, I thought about it at that early stage as much more of an organizing thing, wanting to know that history.

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And I'm sure a lot of it was being bound up in being a white Southerner and trying to come to terms with what that meant in the South at that time, because the predominant image of the white Southerner was someone who was racist and reactionary and all sorts of things that weren't pretty to think about. So, I wanted to find a different history that I was more in tune with.

And I knew that there – and you couldn't find it in the books. I think if there had been a history of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare or a really good history of the labor movement – I mean, there are certainly books on the labor movement, but they weren't talking about the people that I knew had been involved. So, you really did have to go out and find them, and you had to search for them and do those interviews.

And I stumbled into it. Leah [Wise], who I worked with, I think, had a little more experience because she had worked with the archives at the University of Wisconsin. But we really were stumbling and just doing what we wanted to do. And I feel like I learned how to do interviewing, that the people I was interviewing taught me how to do it. I mean, I made some very bad mistakes, which seemed to work out all right because – One example, I was interviewing the cofounder of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and he was one of those people who never – I was with him for two or three days at his house, and he never stopped talking. I would have the tape recorder on, and he would talk. And I would turn the tape recorder off, ending the formal interview, and he would keep talking to me. And I was like – you know. [Laughter]

And he was also telling me stories that I didn't think was in my outline of what I was there to get. And it was only in transcribing and editing his interview that I realized that what I wanted to get was in the stories he was telling me, and I just didn't know it.

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And fortunately he did talk all the time and he did tell those stories! And for the most part I got them on tape. I later wondered what I *didn't* have on tape that he had said.

But I learned from that, and I really began thinking about how to get people's story, and I think eventually came to think that people have their own way of organizing their life story and that my job as an interviewer was to let that organization come out in the interview, rather than trying to do all the research ahead of time. But part of that was because I was feeling a little bit like an imposter in doing the oral history, because I knew there was an Oral History Association, there was the academic – and I went to some of those meetings and was reading some of that material. So, I was trying to pay attention to the field of oral history. At the same time I felt like I was actually learning from my own experience. But I was stumbling along, so to speak.

JW: Um-hmm. So, how did it change your view of southern history, do you think?

ST: Well, I think once we made the attempt to go talk to people, what really – I thought it might be hard, one, to find people, and two, for them to share their stories. And what I found was that people were hungry to tell their stories, or certainly generous, and more than willing and glad that someone had come to talk to them. And it reinforced that sense that it's a lot of people who make history and not just the – certainly not the great white men and not just the names that appear in the history books, but that people on local levels and in organizations, in all of these ways, are really the ones who shape and change history. So, it reinforced that for me. And it did give me a different sense of what it means to be a Southern activist, because I felt like I was part of a long process of

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struggle and not just somebody who had popped up, that there were markers for me as an activist, and heroes, and people to model after, and all of those things.

And actually the first time I sort of began to fathom that was not in an interview I was doing, but right before we went to Mississippi Summer, when we were in our orientation for going to Mississippi and we were at Highlander. We took a break and went up into the Cade's Cove in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. And we ended that evening by going to visit with Sam and Florence Reece. And Florence Reece is the woman who wrote "Which Side Are You On?" And Sam was an activist/organizer for the National Miners Union, the Communist union.

And we sat there and listened to them talk, and to me, it was just the perfect thing to happen right before going to Mississippi, because Florence talked about leaving their house in the middle of the night to get away from the guys who were coming after them, from the "thugs," the "gun thugs," she called them. And it just – hearing her talk about Harlan County in the 1930s, it just made you feel like you were just one little piece of history. While what we were doing was important, it gave a context for what we were doing then that just seemed like, "Well, yeah, we have to keep – this is an ongoing process. We have to keep working on this." And I've always been grateful to her for doing that.

JW: So, you say in *Deep In Our Hearts*, which I was able to read last night, that it took a while for you to find the women's movement.

ST: Um-hmm.

JW: So, I'm wondering how did you finally find it?

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ST: I think it – well, I'll talk about why it took me a while, and then I'll talk about how I found it. I was quite resistant early. I was a civil rights worker. That's how I thought about myself. I felt that I had found my better self through working with SNCC and through working with people – I mean, John Lewis was big for me in terms of what he taught me in Nashville, and the whole experience of working in Mississippi and working with SNCC people and so forth.

And I felt like the civil rights struggle was *the* most important struggle, and was perfectly happy and willing and, I think, politically thought it was the number one priority and that nothing else should interfere with that. So, I didn't think people should get involved in the antiwar movement right away, either, because that's where I was at that moment.

But at the same time I was thinking this, sort of, and that was my political analysis, I was also not always happy with the way I was treated as a woman inside the organization. I was the executive secretary of SSOC, for instance, and sometimes that almost meant that I was the secretary, and other times—I was there doing a lot of the *work*, so it was integral, but you were bumping up against that culture where women were not always treated equally. So, I was noticing those things. It was sort of festering in me, and I was beginning to come to some consciousness around it, I guess is the best way to put it.

But it wasn't until I was in Atlanta, back in Atlanta, for the Institute of Southern Studies – and when I was working on the Institute of Southern Studies, I also was a member of the *Great Speckled Bird*, the underground newspaper cooperative. And there was a caucus of women on the *Bird*, and that developed into a consciousness-raising

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group. And so, I became a part of Atlanta Women's Liberation and the consciousness-raising group.

And that consciousness-raising group, I think, for me, like for many, many other women – that ability to be able to talk to women in a group by yourselves and voice these deep things, these deep feelings, and to process them with each other – was just an amazing thing. And it was supportive, and it did – you began to think about feminist issues in a whole different way.

And certainly, having come to it, I never looked back from it, but it did take me a while to get there. And I think that it was just that I was here at this moment, I was a civil rights activist, and then later realized that I could be many things at once. And that's, I think – it sounds so easy, but I think that whole issue of multiple identities is not always that easy for people to get to, that you can be white, you can be a woman, you can be an activist, you can be whatever, and that you really hold all of those things as a part of who you are.

JW: Um-hmm. In the activist community, do you feel like you could have those multiple identities, or was there pressure to kind of choose one?

ST: No, I – well, prior to coming to – when I was in Washington at the Institute for Policy Studies, there were women organizing women's groups, and I didn't want to be part of a women's group there. I sort of thought of it as middle class and not activist, actually. To tell you the truth, I probably thought it was an indulgence, which sounds very harsh, but I'm afraid that's what I thought. So, it wasn't something I wanted to choose. And it *was* middle class then, and it *wasn't* activist then. I needed to be in a different setting and in a different group. I needed to be with a group of activist women

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in order to come to it, I think. And so, in Washington, I was strong in one identity, but I think, in Atlanta, I was learning about how to hold those multiple identities and certainly coming to some consciousness about being a feminist and still be engaged in doing something else on a fulltime basis. It wasn't like I was doing just that; I was doing other things as well.

I think the identity as a white person, I would say, has been ongoing throughout my entire life, right up until this afternoon's panel. [Laughs] How do you answer these questions? How do you think about this? Did I really think about this? But I do think that I came to some – at some point fairly early with being okay with being white and who I was and not being defensive about it. And I think that actually came along about the same time I thought it was important to work in the white community.

So, I don't recall – there were moments when I felt embarrassed at being a white Southerner, for sure, but I think that there's a difference in being embarrassed and being ashamed or unsure of who you are. But I did certainly have to do some grappling. And part of it was pushing people away, learning how do you push members of your family away, how do you push people in your community away because they're saying things that you're horrified by, or they're acting in ways that you're horrified by? And you want to see them as something completely other when, in fact, they're not completely other. So, certainly, I think I had to do a lot of work around that.

JW: How did your position as a woman from the South, the daughter of a farmer and a factory worker, and civil rights worker – how did that shape your notion of feminism?

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ST: Well, we were not wealthy, and my mother worked my entire life, and she loved working outside the home. [Laughs] My mother was a lousy housekeeper and barely a cook, so the role of homemaker was not her. She did not embrace that. She had gone to work during World War II. When my father had been helping build Oak Ridge, she had gone to work as a driver for one of the Army people there, and she never looked back, really. She loved working outside the home. She loved having an income and being outside the home.

And so, when we moved back to Savannah, she got this job in the factory. And clearly we needed that as income, because there was no income from the farm, and there were weeks when my mother's income was all we had to live on. It was a regular paycheck coming into the family, which you do not get on a farm because it's so seasonal, if it's a good year. So, we were really dependent on her income from that, but I don't think that was the reason she did it.

I think she really liked working outside the home. And she liked, I think, being able to help bring in income, but I think she also liked being able to work with other people and that sort of social environment that you'll find in factories and so forth. And because I could hear her talking about that, I knew she had friends at work, I knew that there were like little groups at work, and so I was just sort of taking in that there was this social life inside that factory that was really a part of who she was.

And also we shared. My father cooked. He could make better biscuits than my mother. He cooked. We shared the housework for the most part. Between me and my brother – my brother was the one who drove the tractor and worked in the fields, but I also – I don't know whether I did more housework, but it was shared, for sure. Maybe I

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did a bit more cooking than he did. But pretty much, we were just all in it together, so I didn't have real skewered models of what it meant to be a woman who didn't do certain things.

I don't know whether I answered your question or not, either, so feel free to push back.

JW: [Laughs] So, what *was* appealing about the women's movement? What was it that, when you got to Atlanta, you thought you would [30:14]?

ST: Well, I think what was appealing was being able to say things, was being able to actually think about things in a safe environment and think about issues of sexism and to work that stuff out. And it was work. I can tell you that those women's consciousness-raising groups, women were telling stories and putting things on the floor, and it was really working through a lot of stuff. I guess I want to say it was partly therapeutic. And it wasn't just storytelling. I think people were really trying to get at sexism and to understand sexism. That was the term then.

And it just felt like *that* was important to me, to be able to voice some of those sort of unvoiced frustrations, and to think about what it meant to be a woman in this society, and to feel like you didn't have barriers, or that you didn't have to put up with certain kinds of bullshit, frankly. There was strength in those groups. And what I always said later: As long as there was a caucus of women on the *Great Speckled Bird*, the men minded their Ps and Qs. The minute the caucus went away, old behaviors returned, imperceptibly in the beginning.

And I still think that's true today. I think unless you have a strong presence of women and a strong consciousness where there's someone being willing to push back on

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you, that behaviors resurface that aren't healthy and aren't good. And sometimes I wish there were more caucuses. [Laughter]

JW: So, were you contributing – did the women's caucus contribute articles and writing to the *Great Speckled Bird*?

ST: No, we didn't contribute – as a caucus, we didn't contribute articles. It was more support for the women who worked on the board. And then most of us, within that caucus, then were a part of a larger organization called Atlanta Women's Liberation. No, but we all were writing articles. I was co-editing women's issues with one of the other women in the caucus, and then I think I edited international issues for a while. So, we were really a part of the collective that was putting the paper out every week.

And we all had different jobs. One person was the layout artist who really worked on the *Bird* to lay it out, make it look good every week. She didn't do a lot of writing then, but other people did. We all had different roles that we did. I don't think we did articles as a caucus, though. I think that was really more about day-to-day relationships and keeping those in line.

JW: What do you think was your – either yours or the women's caucus – what was their contribution to the women's movement, what we think is this broader movement going on? It sounds very different from what you experienced in DC.

ST: Uh-huh. I think it was just – you know, the women's movement gained so much momentum. My reluctance to be a part of what I was seeing – later, the person who was organizing those sessions in DC, I give her a lot of credit. Her name was Marilyn Salzman Webb, and she became a major leader in the early women's movement. They were on the forefront out there, trying to organize women's groups when there was

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much more pushback than there was when I was at the *Great Speckled Bird*. It wasn't as easy then, because people like me weren't that interested or weren't that supportive, and certainly the men weren't.

But I think that, as the women's movement gained momentum, and as women began to see and to experience the consciousness-raising groups and began to find that their own issues had merit, rather than apologizing for bringing forth those issues as being divisive, which was certainly – that was a mantra, over and over, that women's issues were divisive, and you couldn't bring those forward because you had to be working on – class was much more important. Race was much more important. Women's issues were just – you know, that divided everything [laughs] in a way that class and race apparently did not. I don't think I agree with that.

But I think it did gain momentum and I think, by the time I was in Atlanta, nationally it was a different movement. It was much more present, with much more women being willing to join in. And those early people had made that happen. I wasn't one of them, but those people had made that possible to have those kinds of conversations and for little groups like that to form and then grow larger.

JW: Um-hmm. So, how did you see your feminism as related to the involvement in the Freedom Movement? And I'm thinking especially at times where there was the sense that people were sacrificing the time they could be giving to these other issues. How did you deal with that and how did you work through those issues?

ST: [Pause] Because I was working in other things all along, for me, it was more a way of: How do I keep doing this work and be a healthy person and deal with the issues that make me angry? And I saw the women's movement as being a part of this, a part of

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everything, really. I certainly, at the time I was in Atlanta Women's Liberation, I saw it as part of being the larger movement and that you had to have a strong women's movement in order to do these other things. So, I didn't ever feel that I had to make a decision about being a feminist or being actively involved in something else. I had to have the feminist movement in order to keep doing those other things. So, to me, it felt very merged and very much a part of *who* I wanted to be and *how* I could keep doing those things.

Because I think had I worked in isolation of the women's movement, I would have left activism early. I don't think I would have hung in there with it, really. I think you had to have that kind of support and that kind of understanding and that sense of renewal and moving forward with something. In the same way that the blatant racism and segregation had to stop, the oppression against women and the blatant sexism had to stop. So, those things you just had to work on, and you didn't want to *not* address those issues at some point.

And also, it was personal. [Laughs] Politics was personal by then. So, it was clearly something that you – it wasn't like you made a political analysis that you wanted to be involved in the women's movement. I just needed it. I *needed* the women's movement.

JW: How did your family think about your activism over these years?

ST: I've never had a good answer to this, and especially around the early civil rights part. And I think about it a lot, because I never once felt that my family would kick me out of being a family member, which for some white activists was really the case, and for some black activists as well. But I never felt like my family would tell me,

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“You can’t – you have to go away. We don’t love you anymore because you’re doing this.” I never felt that kind of thing. I think my mother and father were worried about my safety, I think, but they didn’t – neither of them ever tamped it down, and they never attempted to tamp it down or to steer me in another direction. I remember my father telling me one time that he was worried and concerned.

And I also remember one time when my mother sort of stood up for me when somebody was commenting on my blue work shirt or something like that, about the way I was dressed, and my mother said, “Well, everybody dresses that way.” She wouldn’t let them be critical of me for the way I was dressing, and she knew that the way I was dressing had to do with my involvement in the civil rights movement, because everybody was wearing blue work shirts and overalls or blue jeans then.

So, they didn’t try to stop it, and they actually came down to Mississippi to visit me in the middle of Mississippi Summer. I had actually misled them a little bit in the beginning by telling them that I was going to work for the National Council of Churches because I didn’t want to alarm them by telling them. They wouldn’t have known what COFO [Council of Federated Organizations] was, but they did know what the NAACP was, so I just used one organization. And, of course, they knew when they came down and they were worried.

But they met my friends. They knew the people I worked with in SSOC. They were okay with it. And I don’t know, because they were working-class, white people who had grown up in rural west Tennessee. Both of them had grown up on farms. Neither of them had a high school education. If you wanted sort of a profile of white

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southern racists, in terms of who those people are and their education levels, they might have fit that. But they weren't *that*.

I don't remember whether I say this in *Deep [in Our] Hearts* or not, but I thought it was – when I thought about it when I was trying to write the chapter for *Deep [in Our] Hearts*, I think they were not afraid. They didn't have that fear of black people that so many white people in the South had. They didn't *fear* that black people were going to take over or hurt their women. They didn't have *any* of that. I never picked up on any of that in my family, and certainly from my mother and father. And I think that made a difference. I think the fact that they didn't have that deep-seated fear that white racists have so deep inside them that it brings up the violent behavior and the hatred and all of that stuff. It wasn't there.

Which is not to say that they were radical activists, because they weren't. [Laughs] They were who they were. And they weren't church-going people. They did not go to church on a regular basis. I went to church with my sister, but my mother and father just – they certainly would say they believed in God and were somewhat religious, but they weren't interested in going to church every Sunday. It just wasn't who they were. And they didn't spout Bible verses all the time.

I just think they were a little bit okay. They were open to it. And they had friends who were black, because we lived in a little community, and they would go fishing with people. So, it wasn't – and I do say – I'm sure I have this in the *Deep[in Our] Hearts* book that I remember my father defending the Supreme Court decision in [19]54 in a very animated discussion in our living room. I would have been maybe twelve or thirteen

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at the time, and it really – I knew that it was a very important thing that he – that stand that he was taking was a really important and unpopular stand, and I never forgot it.

JW: Were you able to talk to them openly about the activist work you were involved in?

ST: Yeah, I was. In the beginning I was a little reluctant to, but over time I was. And that's when my father said, "But I worry. I do worry about you. I fear for your safety." And I think they knew that it was something that I had to do.

I think one of the first things that caught their attention was that – this would have been after [19]64 summer. Yes, it would have been after [19]64 summer, or was it after? Yes. I'm sorry. I have to have a calendar to remember dates. John Lewis and Lester McKinney and I and a guy named Paul Laprad, who had been one of the early Freedom – I don't think he was a Freedom Rider, but he had been involved in the desegregation of the lunch counters in Nashville with Candie Carawan.

We had met Paul in Nashville and we were driving down to Atlanta for a SNCC conference. And Lester was driving my car, which was in my parents' name. And we flipped the car in rural Tennessee outside of Nashville in this little tiny town. The car flipped over, ended up literally on its roof, and then we crawled out windows. I can't remember the name of this little tiny town – Manchester, I think, Tennessee.

And there were two blacks and two whites. Paul Laprad was white. And the patrolman was white, and the people who stopped were white. And they kept asking where the other car was, because they didn't get it that we were all [laughter] – and I didn't understand why they were asking where the other car was. [Laughter] But they kept saying, "Where's the other car?"

Sue Thrasher

But then, when they figured out that we were all in the car together, I don't think they filed a report. They must have filed some kind of report and maybe called a tow truck or something, but then they didn't offer to give us a ride anywhere, and we were sort of on a country road. And sort of out of nowhere – to my memory this is the way it happened – just sort of out of the blue this young African American guy comes and scoops us up and puts us in his car and takes us to his house, or someone's house, where we will be safe until we can get out of town or find our way back to something.

And I didn't even realize what was going on until later, because it was all very confusing, because it was my car that was turned upside down and, of course, I was worried about telling my parents what had happened and so forth. But later, there were two things. One was that we had been – the way word carries inside the black community at that point, and safety issues. I didn't understand that until that moment, that there was like this almost underground net for safety and that I became a part of in that instant. And the other was having to tell my parents that I wasn't driving the car, that in fact this young black man had been driving the car. And they were okay. They didn't yell at me or do anything. They just dealt with the insurance company and did whatever it was. I thought, "That's good."

JW: That's a great story. I'll ask you one more question, so you can – you have dinner to get to. What do you see as the thread or threads uniting the activism that you've really done your entire life? I guess, because you were a Southern white woman, coming not from an activist family, what was it do you think now, as you think back about it, that motivated you to do those things, and what kind of held it all together and kept you going?

Sue Thrasher

ST: Ahm.

JW: It's a big question. [Laughs]

ST: It *is* a big question, and I like the question. I do like the question, so I want to be careful about trying to answer it honestly and thoughtfully. I think my coming to activism in the civil rights movement was in many ways just a searing experience, because it – you really did have to decide who you were and which side you were on. Because friends of mine would make racist comments or do sometimes racist acts, and it was like I was saying today about Anne Braden: There comes a time when you have to figure out who you are. And I knew it wasn't the right thing. It just made me – you know. It just wasn't the right thing. But figuring out how to separate myself from that – I could flinch at what people were saying and know that I felt differently, but figuring out how to act on something took a while, and I sort of had to get pulled into things.

But it was kind of that simple, that it was what you believe in most deeply and what is the right thing to do. And I think that, for me, really came out of the church. My sister had taken me to church. I had gone to this little rural country Methodist church, and every Sunday in the Methodist Church you stand up and you say together a paragraph from the Apostles' Creed. It has a name; I can't remember what it was. But you repeat this every Sunday, and in there you say that you believe in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man and you say all of these wonderful things. And I believe those things. I just literally believe those things. And so, that discrepancy between saying those things and not acting on them, or acting *against* them, as if you didn't really believe them, I just couldn't deal with that contradiction.

Sue Thrasher

And a lot of my activism, I think, came from my battle with the Methodist Church about whether the church actually stood up for those words and actually acted on those words, and I didn't think the church did. The church at that point was not accepting people into membership in congregations. And so, those glaring moments of contradiction were actually real landmarks for me in terms of activism.

A friend of mine who just died, **Abel [52:01]**, who was from Zimbabwe, what was then Rhodesia, was at Scarritt College with me, and he was a Methodist minister. He wasn't a bishop at the time. He was a Methodist minister who was studying at Scarritt. It's the habit in the Methodist Church for the wife of a minister to move her membership, and the minister himself is a member of the district. And so, when his wife went down to one of the largest churches in Nashville to move her membership to that church, she wasn't allowed in. And so, that's like a glaring, huge contradiction that's personal as well. It was personal because they were my friends.

And so, you sort of have to begin dealing – and that's racism that's systemic and institutionalized. So, I think that was all helpful to me in beginning to understand racism as something that wasn't just a personal issue, but how it was systemic and how it was in institutions like the church. What did I start with? So, I think it was that religion was an important factor for me, not so much the religion, but the belief system, the moral issues that I felt had come mostly to me through the church. And so, acting on those felt important to do.

And I still think it's the same thing. I think finding the right thing to do isn't always as easy as it was then. I've always said this about young activists: For us, it was a lot easier, because the issues were so glaring. I think it's not been that easy for activist

Sue Thrasher

generations since to know about. It's not this moment of clarity about what's right and what's wrong, and I think it was then. But it really was about figuring out what was the right thing to do.

And I think – I have said many times over that, to me, the importance of being involved in the civil rights movement and in SNCC was that that's what gave me ground for the rest of my life. It literally put me in a different direction and gave me the sort of deeply held values that I carry today, one about working inside a community of people, working collectively, the way you treat people inside the organization, loving people. All of my early mentors in the movement talked about the "beloved community." And I worked in a community where people cared for each other and took care of each other. So, that grounding has carried me for the rest of my life and made me realize that it's possible to create those kinds of communities. So, without that vision, I don't know what I would have done, but I think it has carried me.

But I say that because I think too often I run into people who live in that time, and I don't want to ever live back there. I want to recognize it as a critical moment in my life, but it's what made me do all the things I've done since. And that, to me, has been really important. It's not something that's a static moment in the past. It's really shaped and defined how I've gone forward with my life, and so I think it's huge for me in that way. But if I had to sum it up, I would say it's about deciding which side you're going to be on and where you stand, what your moral stance is, and whether you're willing to fight for it. And it's the latter one that's always the hardest, you know, because you have to decide how much to fight and what you're willing to risk and all of those things.

JW: Um-hmm. Well, would you like to add anything else?

Sue Thrasher

ST: No. I think I've said enough. [Laughs]

JW: [Laughs] Well, thank you.

ST: Thank you.

JW: That was great.

END OF INTERVIEW

Sally Council

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