

## **TRANSCRIPT: LENORE GENSBURG AND JAMES A. MONSONIS**

Interviewee: Lenore Gensburg and James A. Monsonis  
Interviewer: Orion Teal  
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### **START OF INTERVIEW**

[Transcript begins at 00:22]

Orion Teal: If you could start by stating your name, birth date, and age, for the recording?

Lenore Gensburg: Okay, I'm Lenore Gensburg and I was born February 2, 1944, and that makes me sixty-six years old.

James Monsonis: I'm Jim Monsonis, James, more formally, July, 1937, so that makes me—

LG: '27.

JM: '37.

LG: Oh, you're '37. All right.

JM: Born in 1937—come on!—which makes me seventy-two at the moment.

OT: Great. I guess I'll start with you then. Where were you born?

LG: I was born in Westerly, Rhode Island, which is right on the ocean, right on the coast, where Connecticut and Rhode Island meet in the ocean, so that's where I was born and raised. Should I just proceed?

OT: Sure.

LG: What I was telling you before was that I come from a Jewish family and it was a Catholic town, and it was rather racist in that sense of the town so I think I was always very sensitive about being different and being viewed as different, and had some rather nasty anti-Semitic incidents in my childhood. I think that probably was what resonated when I saw what was happening on the television and in my own community and when I went away to college that sort of drove me to stand up and do something about it.

OT: And were you aware of racial issues too when you were that age?

LG: Well the town is mostly white. There was a young black girl who entered our school in the sixth grade and she was definitely shunned. I was the only one who would talk to her. I went to her house, I used to play with her, she was extremely poor, and it was my first real vision of real poverty, but then she disappeared. I think the town was just too much for her family.

OT: What were your parents' background and politics?

LG: My parents were uneducated. My father did not complete high school; my mother did complete high school. They came from immigrant families and they were very poor, and so they had to go to work to support the younger children who were born after them. I think that they were probably more liberal than most people in the town but they weren't political. They were certainly not going to make waves—because you don't make waves when you're in the small group—and pretty much stuck with what little other Jews there were in the town. They were unhappy with what I did because of fear of

danger to me, not, I think, because ultimately they disagreed with what I was doing.

They were always on that sort of moderate liberal side.

OT: When did you first get involved with the Civil Rights Movement?

LG: I graduated high school at seventeen and went away to a very small college in Hartford, Connecticut, which has a large black community.

JM: Hartford does, not the college.

LG: Hartford.

JM: Yeah.

LG: It was when I was looking at the images of the hoses on the young people that I really was mesmerized by what was going on. I was too young really to leave but I wanted to find out what could be done where we were, and there was something called the Northern Student Movement. [04:39] Peter Morrell, he was a seminary student at Hartford Seminary, and I actually linked up and started tutorials, which is one of the things that NSM did around in the different schools in the community for kids to come after school. It was mostly black kids because we had them in the black community and we organized college students from about four or five colleges in the area to volunteer for these tutorials, so I set up these tutorial centers and got them staffed and worked on that, but we also got involved with the NAACP—or I did; Peter didn't—in a boycott, selective patronage, of—?

JM: Hood Milk Company, wasn't it?

LG: Was it Hood or Seal?

JM: Sealtest?

LG: Sealtest?

OT: Yeah.

LG: Okay, Sealtest. I thought it was crazy because they would deliver milk to the black community but there were no black drivers, so I worked with people on the NAACP on organizing that. We also set up a SNCC support office in the black community. So that was my attempt at trying to do something.

JM: Weren't there some dates for that?

LG: It was probably '62. As a result of that my picture was in some of the local papers and I got kicked out of school for being active, [Laughs] which was kind of crazy. Eventually—and this is where he can take over—I went down to New York City and linked up with the New York City office of SNCC. I had a sister living in New York City and I wasn't going to go back to school. I thought school was worthless at that point. I did go back later. That's where I became active in that sort of Northern SNCC issue.

JM: I comment that she does. I don't know if you even know this. The school denies that you were thrown out for that stuff.

LG: I know they do.

JM: I once inquired just independently and they said you were dropped for failing classes.

LG: That's right, and why did they fail me in my classes when I got "A"s on my finals?

JM: That's their official explanation.

LG: I don't care.

JM: It has nothing to do with this. Well, I'm about seven years older than her so my history comes from a different place, although I grew up in a small town in Connecticut also, although at the other end of the state, a mill town. The minority group in our town were French Canadians. There was one black family in town. Everybody knew them, everybody liked them—quote, unquote—there was nothing of that issue at all. The school I went to had no black students in it, the high school. My first even peripheral experience of black people was in my college entry class of a thousand or so. This is at Yale. In 1954 there were two or three black students among the thousand and I got to know them just casually because we had the same classes together, but that was really probably the first time I ever talked to a black person directly.

But I did get involved in that whole period of time with the Student Christian Movement. I'd been active in my home church; I grew up as a Lutheran. It was an active group on campus. At that time the Student Christian Movement in the United States was a multi-headed, quite active collection of organizations and groups, and eventually I became involved at the national level with the Lutherans, so I thought for a while I was going to go into the clergy. That's where I was headed. I took a year off after school for family reasons and then went to Yale Divinity School. This would have been 1959 that I was at Yale Divinity School, and it was that spring of my first year when the sit-ins began. Yale attracted students from all over the country, of course, and there was really quite a furious debate on campus about how to respond. Some of the students wanted to go down and picket Woolworths and all the rest of it. Actually the Divinity School, more than the undergraduates, led the demonstrations at local Woolworths. I

participated in some of those. I still have a memory of a little old lady whacking me over the head with an umbrella when I was on the picket line there.

Just before that, I should mention briefly, there was a major conference of the Student Christian Movement at I think the University of Ohio at Athens in December—December, '59 it would have been—for a week-long thing, maybe three or four thousand students for a week. I was one of those, but the four kids who began the sit-ins were also there. I don't think I knew them there but there were a lot of foreign students there and there was a lot of discussion about Christians and revolution. The theme of it was "Christianity and Revolution" and a lot of anti-colonialism feelings, a lot of issues about race, and so forth, so it was very much part of my consciousness, even though it was very abstract.

OT: Where did that feeling come from within that organization?

JM: Well I think it came out of the militant side of Protestantism, and from the fact that in many countries the Christian students are very involved in revolutionary activities out of moral commitments. Many folks who later became leaders of the African independence movements were at that conference. We heard speeches by all of them. Jim Lawson was there in fact also. Richard Shaull was the main speaker and a faculty member at Princeton Seminary but had been involved in revolutionary movements in Brazil. So there was a lot of that sentiment, so part of my consciousness had already been shaped by this even before this event happened.

So that was '60 in the spring. And, not at the Raleigh conference but at the October conference when SNCC first took an organizational form in a real sense, more than this temporary committee of the early period, the original committee was formed

from representatives of the activist student movements in various states plus representatives from the National Student Association, plus a representative from the national Student Christian Federation, which was this umbrella organization of the student Christian movements in the United States. That was in October, but in August before that I had been elected to the national chair of the National Student Christian Federation, I was the representative to the original SNCC. In fact, Tim Jenkins was the other, so I guess I was the first white guy in that technical sense, although at that time it was just a committee that just tried to coordinate things. If you know the history it didn't really do anything directly for a while. So that was my first involvement. I still remember that October conference, coming to Atlanta and walking into a room with two or three hundred black students. That was the first time I'd ever seen that many black people in one spot together, just a mind blowing kind of experience for me.

I went back to school. Actually that first year I was working full time for the National Student Christian Federation, visiting colleges around the country and talking about the sit-in movement. I had a co-traveler, actually, a guy from the Student Christian Movement of Cuba, who happened to have a visa that was good in the United States, and the two of us traveled together talking about Christianity and revolution. We visited some thirty or forty campuses in the course of the year. Not here that I remember, but we went to a number of places. Randolph Macon I think we were at—that was the closest we got to here—which did not welcome us. That's another story I won't get into.

I went back to seminary. SNCC was meeting at that time about every couple months as a weekend meeting kind of thing. I'd go to these meetings, try to construct a budget for them since I knew something about organizations, that kind of thing. I went

back to seminary for one term and said that was it and dropped out and drove to Atlanta and moved into the office, more or less. The weekend I arrived nobody really knew I was coming. They had all closed up. [James] Forman, [Norma] Collins, all those folks were off in Albany getting arrested. Although the office was wide open there wasn't a person there, on Raymond Street. It was just completely empty and the black newspaper was across the street so I went over there to find out what was going on and ended up spending the weekend somewhere out in the county, outside of Atlanta, the first time I'd ever had a possum in my life. [15:19] Backwoods. But I knew many of the staff people from this monthly meetings kind of thing so I just moved into [a role then] from probably February of '62 this would have been now.

I didn't have any particular assignments or whatever. I knew a little bit about organizations. In fact there was a SNCC conference that spring of all the staff and all the local chapters and I worked primarily putting that together, raising the money for it, writing a lot of foundations to support getting the money for that. That was at the Atlanta University complex. So I stayed there essentially in the SNCC office with Forman and Julian [Bond]—those are the ones I remember—Norma Collins and one or two other people, and that was basically that until the summer. That was also concurrently the time that SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] was forming and I'd been involved in SDS earlier from the Student Christian Movement side, and Al Haber recruited me at that point.

OT: Was that SLID [Student League for Industrial Democracy]?

LG: Yeah, SLID.

JM: Yeah, when it was still SLID.



OT: Because they had a big chapter at Yale, right?

JM: Yeah, but I wasn't part of that. I was out of Yale already. This was when I was in New York working for the Student Christian Movement full time but I was involved in meeting the New York folks, Haber and the other folks, and was at the Port Huron meetings. So if you know where that one leads you know where that document was. That was my political education. Those are the guys who taught me in politics. I didn't know anything really. I had a good Christian morality but I had no politics, other than say, hey, you know, it would be nice if we all lived together, kind of thing.

OT: Were there other people that bridged both of those worlds?

JM: A few. Maria Varela, Tim Jenkins, both were at both of those meetings; Tom Hayden in a different way. Tom was primarily SDS but he was also involved peripherally. Casey Hayden. I met Casey the prior October at that big meeting in Atlanta. Dorothy Burlage, who's here, was also at that Atlanta meeting. I just saw Dorothy at lunch and told her how this was such an experience for me to meet these white Southern kids out of Texas who really had a real sense of who they were, because you really had to be at that point.

So out of the SDS meeting at Port Huron, and really because there wasn't anything specific for me to do in SNCC except sweep the floors—although Forman claims credit always for being the guy who swept the floors I did a lot of floor sweeping too—so I stopped. I went to work for SDS for a year and I ran the national office of SDS in New York from that time through to the following summer—that would have been into the summer of '63—and went with an SDS group to the March on Washington. But I'd always been in touch with those guys. I was sharing an apartment in New York with Bill

Mahoney who was out of the NAG movement in Washington, a Howard student, very much involved in all this stuff. In that fall, in September of '63, I went back to work for SNCC in the office in New York as a fundraising office, fundraising and education. We did a lot of speaking at local schools. Not so much me; they didn't want to hear from a white Northern kid. They wanted black kids that had come out of the South, so I did a lot of arranging, setting up meetings, that kind of stuff.

OT: And people would come up?

JM: Yeah, they'd come up. We'd have somebody up come up for a week and we'd arrange a whole bunch of things for them to speak, or parties, fundraising parties, things of this sort.

LG: New York was good for R&R. You could get medical attention, you could go out and go to a bar or something, you know. Yeah, so then they would go around speaking.

JM: I had an apartment just a couple of blocks away from the office which meant that most of these folks stayed with me—not most, but many of them did—as they passed through, and a lot of good conversations there. That was also part of my own political education. But again it was an office run by, as far as pay goes, two of us, Julie Prettyman who's here—you might find her version of this a little different and interesting—and a lot of volunteers. I'd had a lot of movement experiences, student experiences and so forth, so that was why I was useful. I had a reasonable education. I could write a press release, that kind of thing. So I was in the New York office right down until the summer. Now that's where our histories connect because Lenore came in as a volunteer into that office.

LG: I came in as a volunteer and I started, then they actually put me on salary but Forman said he wanted me to go down to Washington because Mike Thelwell wanted to go to the summer '64. He was running the office in Washington and he wanted to go down to Mississippi so Forman asked me if I would go down to Washington to work on that office and to set up an MFDP [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party] presence there. Now remember, I'm very young and I'm very naïve, not much sophistication, but I was good at that kind of thing. So I went down to Washington and then I think in a sort of romantic ploy.

JM: Ivanhoe [Donaldson] today said Forman was such a romantic. That was his term. You know of Jim Forman?

JM: Romantic wouldn't be the first word that would come to my mind.

LG: Oh, but he was, and I think that's why he said to Jim he should go down and also work in the Washington office.

JM: He knew we were already a couple.

LG: He knew we were a couple, and I seriously think that he was a romantic in that sense. He was a beautiful man. He really was. So I went down to the Washington office and Mike left.

JM: I came a few weeks later.

LG: Yeah, and tried to set up some contacts. One of the things they wanted for MFDP was contacts with Congress in the Democratic party to see if they could get support people. Frank Smith came later as well. He's really the political one.

JM: And Mike too.

LG: And Mike. Well Mike was down in Mississippi.

JM: Not yet. Mike took me around to some of the Congressional offices, introduced me to Congressmen and to the staff. Often the Congress staff were more useful than the actually Congressmen. If you need something run off you could go to staff X, Y, and Z.

LG: Or access to that particular Congressman, you needed the staff. So we were in Washington, D.C. for the summer, went to Atlanta for the actual challenge, but mostly worked on the mechanics of getting the thing so that it would work: raising money, getting community support, getting students, and just generally also when Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney were murdered—but we didn't know that—putting out the press releases, getting lots of people in Washington, Congress, FBI, whatever, to sort of move on this, not just sit on it.

JM: One of the things we did that summer was to make sure that a Congressman knew what students or young people from his district were working in Mississippi and where.

OT: Right, so they could call.

JM: So they could call. [Not all the] Congressmen were interested. Some weren't and didn't want to know that, but we made sure they knew anyway. What was his name? The son of one of the Congressmen, Len [Leonard] Edwards, Congressman [Don] Edwards from California's son, was involved in the summer project that year, and there were a number of others involved in that period of time. So we were cranking out press releases, making these contacts, letting parents know [when they got called], and trying to raise some money. Belafonte, who spoke today, came down and gave us a couple of

evenings and we raised a lot of money. A hundred dollar a plate dinner, you know, that kind of thing.

LG: I think it was a thousand dollars. That evening was a thousand dollars to be there.

JM: Well one evening was a thousand. A handful of people to come just to meet with him.

JM: That was only about twelve or fifteen people but you know they were willing to shell out a thousand dollars.

OT: That's amazing.

LG: Yeah. Especially then it was a lot of money.

OT: Yeah.

LG: Most of SNCC fundraising was like five, ten dollar donations that would come in. You'd go out and you'd speak and pass the hat, but five or ten dollars added up because your outgo wasn't that much. Your salaries were pretty low so you didn't have to raise that much.

JM: We had a contact in the President's office. I can't remember his name—it'll come to me—so that when something happened in the South and they wanted to take that to the White House somebody could come up and we could call and they would make an [interview] to go over and meet Johnson. We stopped doing this after a while because Lyndon Johnson was so persuasive that these folks out of rural Mississippi or Alabama came away feeling that this guy was absolutely committed to their cause and would do absolutely everything, so we stopped doing that. We really discouraged it after a while because we could see the payoff was the wrong thing. It wasn't making the point.

LG: It was supposed to be the other way around, the persuasion.

JM: Yeah, but somebody we could call, anyway, in the office there and let them know, and we did a lot of press work. Mostly what happened then is after they'd come up we'd make sure they sat with Stephen Roberts of the *New York Times*, at the *Times* office in Washington, or one of the other newspapers, the *Washington Post* people. The *Post* never had a single person working on civil rights, they had a whole bunch of them, but the *Times* had one person who dealt with that always. A lot of it was that kind of stuff. It wasn't dangerous. I'd been traveling actually, took me through the South some before, mostly just to make sure I knew what I was talking about, but I keep saying, I don't have a lot of this history that a lot of folks do. We really were rarely in a situation of some danger. I'd been on odd picket lines here and there.

LG: But there were some gems that came up. I'm thinking about the time that I sued the *Washington Post* for discriminatory advertising. I was looking for a house for Frank Smith, a place to stay, and it said, "White house," so I called up and said, "What's a 'white house'?" The guy told me and we got an injunction against the guy and we got an injunction against the newspaper, the *Washington Post*. The agreement in the suit was that they would cease and desist in segregated announcements, so that was kind of fun. We integrated the house we lived in.

JM: Yeah, yeah. And we got married in the middle of that summer too, an odd thing that just happened.

LG: But it was an interesting time and it was an interesting place to be. It was definitely a Southern city, very definitely, and we were in a black community.

JM: We weren't paid very much but then again we got mostly free services because that was the nice thing about the support system that developed. We needed dental work, we got it. We needed medical work, we got it.

OT: That was from—

JM: Free.

OT: —sympathetic—

LG: That's right.

OT: [27:55]

JM: From sympathetic support, yeah.

LG: Exactly. When I needed glasses I could get a new pair of glasses, and stuff like that.

JM: Somebody gave us a whole set of dishes for our wedding and wouldn't charge us for it, that kind of thing. There was a lot of that kind of nice support, and that's important too because that let people feel they were part of it. Even if they weren't doing anything more than writing a check they were also involved in some other sense.

So we saw a lot of people just passing through basically in the office there and handling a lot of that press kind of stuff and raising money, and that carries us to Atlantic City and then things changed after that. The whole temper of the movement changed in many ways.

LG: Right, but we didn't leave it then.

JM: No, we didn't leave. Periodically there would be staff meetings in Atlanta or somewhere else and we would go to those, but there was always within SNCC too the kind of sometimes explicit, mostly implicit, division between the field people and the

office people, you know, which was touchy sometimes. We were getting paid more but we were paying rent.

LG: And feeding ourselves, yeah.

JM: And we got to eat in a different way.

OT: What were those disagreements about, or tensions?

JM: Well sometimes they were about money. We were getting more.

LG: I didn't ever sense it was about money.

JM: You didn't?

LG: No.

JM: Well I think some of it was about program, feeling that they were the ones who should decide what programs, what we should do and where we should do it. White people by and large kept a very low presence. We understood that. [Bob] Zellner may have been an active egalitarian in terms of things but I always understood that our job is to be there and shut up.

LG: Support.

JM: —and listen.

LG: That's right, and just support what they're doing.

JM: I don't think I ever said a single thing in any plenary session of any SNCC meeting any time the whole staff gathered, not that I can remember, although we were at them all, but I don't think I ever said a word in any of them. For a while Forman kind of appointed me to integrate new white folks into the staff who weren't careful of their language, or whatever. He'd ask me to go take so-and-so over in a corner, have dinner with him, and talk to him about how you deal with being around black people.



OT: What would you tell them?

JM: Mostly to shut up and listen and not to flaunt your education. That was a big part of it because we took for granted a vocabulary and a methodology of speaking that basically only the white folks from the North or the black folks from the North,--

LG: That's right.

JM: —the people who came out of Howard—

LG: Black educated.

JM: —or something like that, could do. Stokely had a marvelous command of language, but somebody coming out of rural Mississippi wouldn't understand Stokely even. But we're even the other side. Not only did we have that but we're also the wrong color, so we kept a very low profile as far as that goes. We were among the very few married staff too at that period, although I don't think that was a particular issue.

LG: No, no, but there definitely was a division between office and field staff. After the challenge in Atlantic City there was a brewing discomfort of white and black, and I'm not sure—because at one of the meetings Stokely came out with that awful statement of his.

I have a sense that there was also an educational issue because he was protesting that he wasn't like the others, that he was just, you know, that he's black and that makes him just like the poor, uneducated Southerner, and he really wasn't, so class was beginning to play a role, I think, in some of the divisions. There were tensions. You can't maintain that kind of intensity for a very long time, and the office versus field staff and then white and black.

JM: And sex.

LG: And sex, you know. He didn't take me around to show me to the different—Mike didn't—to the different Congressional offices and introduce me. That was something that—

JM: That was my job.

LG: —he was going to do, you see, so there was a lot of sexism.

JM: And he didn't take you through the Delta.

LG: That's right.

JM: Ivanhoe wouldn't have taken you.

LG: Well Ivanhoe was too scared. He admitted.

JM: That was just simple intelligence.

LG: I was going to go down and he said, "uh uh, no."

JM: You couldn't ride around with a white woman in Mississippi.

LG: And I understood that. I understood that one hundred percent. I was not upset with Ivanhoe for that.

JM: Once we got into this northern role, we went south occasionally. I was in Albany briefly, you were in a couple other places. But most of the time, we were in the North or in Washington and not very much involved with the day-to-day stuff that the Movement got involved in. We raised a lot of money in the fall after the Atlanta challenge. Because clothing became an issue that winter we loaded a whole boxcar of clothing from the Washington area to Mississippi. I remember that. That was a big deal. We got a local toy supply company to give us about a half a boxcar of toys for the kids. I don't know whatever happened to those. It could be something that maybe some kid had a little game, and that was, I thought, a nice thing to do.

What happens from then?

LG: About the spring, when tensions were heightened, especially around issues of class and white.

OT: This would be spring '65?

JM: '64.

LG: '65.

JM: '65.

LG: Because it was the summer of '65. I left first and then Jim left SNCC. I left the staff and then Jim left but— How did Tom get in touch with us?

JM: Well we could see the handwriting on the wall. It was clear that we were on and we should be. The way the Movement was going we knew that.

LG: We agreed with the Black Power.

JM: Washington, D.C. is not a place to have a staff office of two white people.

LG: That's right.

JM: That doesn't make any sense.

LG: And Black Power was very important. We always played that sort of low role and I thought that was the important thing to do, and maybe no role was the best.

JM: So we had to do two jobs. One was to plan a successor for us and the other was to figure out what we were going to do with our lives. [I'll deal with those separately.] Forman gave us the names of three or four different people to take over the Washington office, and it was our collective, although I think with some misgivings, that we thought that Marion Barry would be the best successor for us. Not because we particularly liked Marion—and I would say that now to his face, that we were never

friends and I never much cared for him as a human being—but he was smart and he was very political, obviously. Look what happened in Washington. You know he knew how to do the political game. And we thought he would be the best choice of the ones given to us, and so in late spring, it must have been, Marion came over and took over the operation in Washington.

LG: Which was the right thing.

JM: We should step back because this is something of some note. In that spring was the first big demonstration, Easter time, against the war in Vietnam that was organized by SDS. Now I still had a history and a relationship with all these SDS people and it happened that one of the people from SDS called us and said, “Do you know where we could have office space in Washington?” and we happened to have space in the building that we were in so we said, “Yeah, come and use our space.” I’ve seen this in writing saying that this was the great merging of SNCC and SDS and all the rest of this and it’s symbolized by the fact that this demonstration was run out of the SNCC office.

There was no ideological dimension. It just happened to be who knew who. Bob Moses spoke at that rally but our office had no planning of it. It was planned entirely by SDS and we just happened to have a convenient space for them to run it out of. But I went on that picket line at the White House for one afternoon. I remember Casey cussing me out because I had a white shirt and tie on and she said, “This demonstration is against people with ties.” I don’t know if she’ll admit to that but I remember it very clearly. I’d just come from some Congressional office; I had a tie on.

So anyway, the way it came is from—what was the first name, Bowman?—another SNCC person—another white woman, in fact—knowing us and knowing we

were kind of looking around to see what was going to happen next, called us and said, “There’s this guy up in New York who’s organizing a statewide Head Start program in Mississippi and he needs some help. Why don’t you go and meet with him?” and she arranged it. Something Bowman; I have a blank on her first name.

LG: So we went up to talk to Tom, Tom Levin.

JM: So we went up and met in a restaurant.

LG: Tad’s Steak House, that junky steak house.

JM: No, we didn’t.

LG: Yeah, on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street.

JM: That’s not my memory.

LG: All right. Anyway we met with Tom.

JM: Mine is that we met at the White Horse.

LG: No.

JM: Anyway, it doesn’t matter.

LG: And he talked to us about CDGM. Do you know what that was at all?

OT: A little bit.

JM: This is a group called the Child Development Group of Mississippi, which became the statewide Head Start program in Mississippi. Because what he needed and why he was interested in talking to Movement people is that he’d been involved in the Medical Committee for Human Rights and he’d designed a beautiful program. The Head Start [program was a] highly imaginative creative program—

LG: Yeah, very creative.

JM: —but he didn't have any contacts in the state and we knew the Movement people, and SNCC was at that time financially in trouble and these guys needed a job. What they needed was a paycheck. They didn't need a job, they needed a paycheck. We knew who they were, a number of them, and we thought we could make the connection for him. He also was smart enough to know that he needed not only himself but he needed entrée into the black communities in the state.

LG: And he was comfortable with it.

JM: Yeah.

LG: He was comfortable with that connection between SNCC coworkers and CDGM.

JM: Yeah, it was not an issue.

LG: [Senator James] Eastland blew his gaskets about it, but that was all right. So we went down to Mississippi for the summer of '65 and what's fascinating to me is that the history has sort of made that a continuation of the SNCC Civil Rights Movement.

OT: Yeah, yeah, the connection between the Head Start and—we just had an interview with someone who presented that as Bob Moses' baby.

JM: No.

LG: The CDGM?

JM: Bob had nothing to do with it.

LG: No, no, no, no. Freedom Schools in the summer of '64, absolutely yes.

OT: Yeah. He said Head Start as well, but—

LG: No.

OT: Okay.

LG: No, that was Tom Levin.

JM: The federal government wanted a model program.

LG: Oh, we all did.

JM: They wanted something political.

LG: The War on Poverty.

OT: Right.

JM: Okay, and this looked beautiful to them. Tom had a number of very interesting dimensions to it. Not only were they going to run schools for kids to get them into Head Start stuff, do medical care for the kids, work with the parents to talk about how come you're not on the school board if your kids are in the school system.

LG: Well, he wouldn't open up a center unless the community had gotten together and organized to have a center come there, so essentially it was an organizing tool. It was an idea around which the community could organize and they had to help provide space and equipment for the schools. Not all the equipment, but, you know, to participate fully in the formation of it. The teachers came from the community and one of the things that he felt strongly, and I agree with him, is that this was a way for the children to see their parents taking control and to have some sort of dignified work and position in their lives as opposed to the sort of shuffling aside that happens in the usual racist Mississippi.

JM: Against a lot of opposition he was committed to the idea that the teachers in these schools did not have to have professional credentials, were not going to be the black middle class handful of teachers around, and there was a real effort made to integrate the schools, although we got almost no white kids, a handful and they dropped out very

quickly. So it became a black program right from the beginning, although not intentionally.

LG: The food was bought from black farmers so a million and a half dollars a month was just poured into the black community.

JM: About a million dollars a month.

LG: One of the things that really riled Washington was that the vans and everything that were being provided by CDGM were also being used for voter registration, you know, for political work, which you're not supposed to do. [This] violated, theoretically, the federal rules on all of this. But we ran it and Lenore took over the money, the financial side of the whole operation, signing all the checks with an old check signature machine. Remember those things? They insisted on handing us an accounting firm from New Jersey that was going to handle [everything]—

LG: Useless.

JM: —and all they did was just complicate the mess and it took weeks. In fact, these guys were so incompetent the local folks actually had a sit-in in the movement office to try to get their paychecks because these guys in New Jersey were so incompetent.

LG: I just paid no attention to them, which also got me in trouble.

JM: Yeah, the federal inspectors would come down and say to her, “I want to meet with you,” and she would say,—

LG: I'd go, “No, I'm too busy.”

JM: —“No, I don't have any time.”

LG: “Go away. Leave me alone.”



JM: Because I had the contact with the Movement staff I basically headed up the staff side of it. We had about eight hundred staff people altogether in that Head Start and we had about six thousand kids, something like that—I don't remember the exact numbers but it's in that range—eighty-something centers, six thousand kids, which was more than the census said there were in that age group in the state of Mississippi. That's how accurate the census was.

LG: In the black community.

JM: In the black community. We had more kids in the centers than the census said there were in the state. They just didn't care about rural blacks and they never made it into the census. So, and you know some of that history. We were at—what do you call it?

LG: Edwards.

JM: Not Edwards—

LG: Mount Beulah.

JM: —Mount Beulah, the old black college that was in the center of the state, on the administrative side, so other than some fleeting visits to centers we really didn't get out and do the Freedom Schools or the teaching side of it at all.

LG: Again we did the administrative side.

JM: Our job was an administrative job. This is what we could do. This is where our skills were. We got shot at once, but that's just in passing.

You got threatened by a shotgun once or twice up at Holly Springs, didn't you?

LG: Yeah, up at Holly Springs.

OT: How did that happen?

LG: Flukey and I went to get an ice cream and—

JM: It's a black guy.

LG: It's a black guy. And I said, "I want an ice cream," and he says, "We don't have any," and I said—I have a big mouth—"I'm going to report you to the feds. You have ice cream. I want some ice cream." He said, "You want some ice cream?" and pulls out a shotgun. I don't how, but Flukey got me on the other side of this fence, somehow, and the guy shot at us but that was it. It was intense, but you don't insist on your rights in certain circumstances, I'll tell you.

JM: One thing about shootings too is they happen so quickly either you're fine or you aren't.

LG: Yeah, yeah, exactly. That's exactly what happened.

JM: And the campus, this was an old defunct black campus and a guy came on the campus and shot at the administration building a couple of times. Nobody got hurt.

LG: It was an intense summer. Again we didn't last very long. In the end of the summer it was clear that our days were numbered. The OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] was bowing to pressure from the politicals and started pulling the teeth out of the program. Eventually they wanted licensed teachers. They were upset by the way—

JM: They didn't want us to employ some of the doctors that we were using because they were "radical communists." That was one of the things. They wanted to control who we had on the staff.

LG: They wanted us to move to a campus that we would be more controllable, they wanted—

JM: Yeah, they wanted to drop Tom from running the whole thing.

LG: —Tom off, you know.

JM: They put a lot of pressure on the board, the state board of CDGM, and eventually the board asked Tom to step aside, Tom Levin, who ran the whole thing, and Tom did, reluctantly, but he agreed.

JM: Rather than destroy the whole thing, and turned it over to me. My memory is it was a Saturday morning.

LG: And by Saturday night we were on a plane home.

JM: We thought about it for the morning and the afternoon and said this is an untenable position. I can't do this. Just let them do what they want to do, if they want to bring somebody else in from outside, but I'm not going to play this stooge role. I think we had dinner with them in Jackson and took a plane out that night. I didn't come back to Mississippi for another thirty years, or something like that.

LG: Forty years.

JM: Forty-something years, before we returned to the state.

OT: So how did those programs survive?

LG: Well it was interesting. I was today being interviewed by a young woman who is doing her dissertation on CDGM. So I learned enormous amounts from her, let me tell you. They did survive but they were definitely changed, the natures of them were changed. They became more traditional. A Head Start school's parents became less involved in it. As I said they required that teachers be registered so they fired some of the community people who were working on it. It took years, like three or four years, for this to all take place, but they moved it from this independent, black identified place to another place. Apparently they set up other Head Start programs and they convinced—at

least this is the story that Aaron Henry says—they convinced him that he was on our board—that CDGM was not going to be funded so he went over to create this MAP, Mississippi Action Project, or something, and in fact that wasn't true. And so there became this competition between CDGM and MAP, really nasty stuff, and really I think took what was a really interesting community based Head Start program and just turned it into an ordinary, everyday. It's still good. Kids got food, they learned what colors are, but it didn't have that spark that it had before.

JM: Because it really had a more radical purpose behind it. Tom comes out of the socialist movements of his youth. He was older than us. He would be, what, eighty-five or so now. He comes out of that background and he really saw it as an organizing tool to organize with parents and very much a continuation of the kind of thing that SNCC would do—with money. But it's federal money; that's the problem.

JM: Somebody said today, "the federal government never pays for its own—the people who are going to organize it destroy it."

LG: It's against them, right. And we knew that when we went down. Federal money, you know, our days were numbered. If we're going to do anything we're just going to be able to do a short period of time, but boy, that was a fun three months down there.

OT: So what did you both do next?

LG: He went to graduate school, I went to—

JM: That was always in the back pocket in case, yeah.

LG: I went to work. I worked in the anti-war movement. I worked for an organization that organized GIs to resist the war and defended them when they went

AWOL, found sanctuary for them, etcetera, etcetera. I don't know if you know this part of the history but there were newspapers that the GIs could produce themselves and it was, you know, anti-war GI newspapers and coffee houses, and we funded those. I worked with the Southeast Asia group. So I did that until I finally later on went back to school because my interrupted college education was beginning to worry me and I figured I was ready to go back to school. Pretty much after the signing of the peace agreement with Vietnam the anti-war movement just dried right up.

JM: At that time for me, Danforth Foundation—which is now almost entirely committed to doing things in St. Louis only—at that time had a national program. One of their programs was to fund the training of college teachers who were involved in social justice issues, which fit exactly my background, so I was able to get a Danforth Fellowship. In fact a lot of the people on the committees were people I had been in seminary with before years ago. I knew them all. The review committees, and so forth, so that's how I got funded for my graduate study. That program doesn't exist anymore. There was a lot more funding of that kind of thing in the '60s than there is now. But that's basically our story.

LG: One more little fillip; I went back to school. I went to graduate school, and I'm in public health, which is kind of not the same thing, but kind of the same thing. Right now I teach in the school of public health. I teach statistics to epidemiologists, budding epidemiologists, but I did research for many years into environmental health issues. It's not like going into corporate America or anything. I really felt like I was still doing something that was socially relevant.

OT: What sort of lessons or experiences did you carry into this later part of your life, specifically from the SNCC experience?

LG: From the SNCC experience?

JM: Well I think I—this is my political education, but in the very broadest sense, the sense that's been talked about a lot here, it's not accidental that later on in my college career I taught courses on gender, taught course on maleness, for instance, at a time when anybody's only teaching about the female side of it. They weren't teaching that there were two genders. I continued to teach about civil rights stuff, I taught about Asian studies, I taught a lot of courses on integration and that whole kind of thing, and on poverty. It's not accidental; that's a continuation of the kind of thing that was there. Now, for a long time because of the way SNCC broke up we didn't see any of these movement people, for years, except a very few handful of them, mostly the whites, because of the way it split up. There were just a handful of blacks and it's only been in the last ten or fifteen years that we've gotten to reconnect with any of the black people that we were once very close to, and those are mostly academics.

LG: I think what I carried with me was a strong sense of if you think something's wrong stand up for it, or up to it. Even though I teach statistics and it's mathematical I always interject: "Why aren't you angry about public policy? Why aren't you angry about the health care? Why aren't you out there doing something about this?" And talking about public health in Haiti, talking about public health after Katrina in New Orleans, and just always getting the students to sort of get out of their stupor and somehow think about things. Just don't accept them; just think about them. I don't think

I get through to very many of them, but that sense of outrage that I had when I was young. I just wish I was younger and could do more, but I think that that's true.

JM: I taught at an unusual college most of my life but those kids that I taught went off and did all kinds of activist stuff. The core of MoveOn[.org] are old former students of mine.

OT: What school is it?

JM: This is a little place called Simon's Rock College up in western Massachusetts that you've probably never heard of.

LG: Yeah, the guy who heads MoveOn is from Simon's Rock.

JM: Among others. Some of them are scattered throughout Latin America, a whole bunch of places. You mentioned New Orleans but the two major health centers there in New Orleans are staffed by former students of mine.

LG: Set up by former students.

JM: Yeah, set up and staffed by, so in a way that's another continuation of the same.

LG: The alumni put together a grant fund and they named it after him and it's for students who want to spend a summer doing something socially relevant. They can get a grant from the Jim Monsonis Fund, which is pretty neat.

JM: Which is very nice. I like that. They've made some good films about poverty in America and other places, Eastern Europe. One of my grantees is now working on resuscitating the Huron Indian language. He's Indian himself, working on keeping the language from dying. So we think there is a kind of spread effect from this stuff from our years.

LG: Yeah, which is nice.

JM: Does that cover it? I don't know if that's what—

OT: I think that's perfect— Thanks for giving us your time.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

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