

TRANSCRIPT: WALLACE ROBERTS

Interviewee: Wallace Roberts

Interviewer: Orion Teal

Interview date: April 16, 2010

Location: Shaw University, Raleigh, NC

Length: 1 disc, approximately 45 minutes

START OF INTERVIEW

Orion Teal: Well, thanks for coming.

Wallace Roberts: Sure. Happy to be here.

OT: If you could just state your name, your birth date, and your age.

WR: My name is Wally Roberts. I was born July 2, 1941. I'm sixty-eight years old.

OT: And where did you grow up?

WR: I was born on the Philadelphia Main Line right outside Philadelphia, and I grew up mostly in a small town in Westchester County, New York, right outside New York City—a town called Bronxville. When I was growing up there, they did not allow anybody in town who owned a house to sell the house to blacks or Jews. It was restricted in their deeds. This was thrown out by a court case in the late Sixties. So I grew up, basically—and it's a very wealthy community—so I grew up without meeting hardly any blacks or Jews. But we were real close to New York City, and the couple of the towns

WALLACE ROBERTS

that surrounded us had substantial black populations. And it was noticeable to me from the time I was probably nine or ten. I knew we had a black cleaning lady. And I would go into New York City on the commuter train and go through Harlem, above ground and up about the level of the third story apartments. And those apartments were only maybe twenty-five feet from the railroad tracks, so most of the time people had their windows open, and you could see the living conditions. And that's when I began to be aware of what poverty must be like—for black people.

Well, I was very much aware of the Montgomery bus boycott and the events after that. But then my first involvement with the movement came—I think it was 1957 or '58—with the integration of Little Rock High School. Those images on television, as well as the earlier images in Montgomery, made a deep impression on me. And I had a chance to meet one of the young girls who had integrated Little Rock High School when the NAACP brought her north for a fundraising program that fall. And I was just very impressed with her intelligence, courage, and poise. So that really made me feel attached to the movement in some way. It was a pretty inchoate feeling and not really articulated in any way, but I just felt deeply that there was some great injustices in this situation. And, I can't remember that, but I probably began to feel I should try to do something to help out.

OT: How did you get involved first?

WR: I went to Dartmouth, so I was pretty remote from everything, and I also got married very young, in my freshman year. And that really kind of occupied my life in

WALLACE ROBERTS

college. But after college I started to teach in a small private school in western Massachusetts—coed, very progressive school, called Windsor Mountain School. It was founded by a couple of refugees from Nazi Germany who were also students of Freud. And they had a great mix of kids: black and white, rich and poor, multicultural. We had kids from Kenya and Nigeria. The year I was there, that was the year we won the Newland soccer championship, actually. [Laughter] But it was wonderful, really, to encounter those kids at that time in my life. And Harry Belafonte, who just spoke, his daughter was in my English class, so there was some direct connections to what was going on in the Civil Rights Movement because he was already involved by that time.

I was there from '62 to '64. Sometime in the winter of '64, I saw an article in The New York Times about the Mississippi Summer Project. It was an interview with Bob Moses, and it described what they were going to do and that they needed volunteers from the North. So I decided to write away and apply, and I didn't really think I'd ever hear from them, and I didn't tell my wife what I was doing. But then I was accepted, and they were pretty anxious to get me because I already had two years of experience and most of the kids going south were just in college. So they asked if I would be a Freedom School coordinator in charge of the local Freedom Schools they were setting up. So I said yes, and naturally my wife was not happy about it, but she came around to support me. And my parents did at first, so it was okay. I knew I was leaving my wife there at Windsor Mountain. I knew she would have a strong support system from the headmaster and the other teachers there, so she would be okay during the summer.

WALLACE ROBERTS

So that's how I became involved. I went to the orientation in Oxford, Ohio and because I was supposed to be a coordinator for a Freedom School, I came early. Most of the freedom school teachers came to the second session, I was there for both sessions. And we learned the tactics of non-violence: how to do a demonstration, how to set up Freedom Schools, how to operate, how to stay alive in the South. And it was a very emotional experience because the SNCC staff workers were very concerned that we clearly understand the danger we were getting into. And they wanted no illusions on that part. So they did almost everything I think they could think of to scare us out of it. They really wanted people who were going to be rock solid. (7:17-7:19) We had role playing, and mock demonstrations, and reactions with angry crowds, and then some very emotional sessions with some of the SNCC workers—some of whom were clearly burned out already. They just were so emotionally overwrought that they had difficulty containing themselves. You know, they had really been beaten and brutalized, it was quite understandable.

But I remember one session there was a guy who just started an impromptu—in the lobby of one of the dormitories where we were—a guy named Cordell Reagon who was then part of the Freedom Singers and he just went on a long rap, very emotional, very intense. It just trying to—not talk us out of going—but trying to get across to us that this was no picnic and that we really had to be prepared for anything. I was so shook up from that that, I can remember afterwards we'd gathered around, started singing, and I could not keep time clapping my hands I was just so stupefied.

WALLACE ROBERTS

But we hung in there, for the first week, and then over the weekend. Between the first and second session, after the first group had left and gone South to Mississippi, we got the word that Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman were missing. And almost immediately, the SNCC staff said, "They're dead. They're probably dead. You need to know that. You need to realize that." And that stunned us. So we had to kind of pick up the pieces—the Freedom School teachers were coming in the next day—and go from there. So it was a very intense second week, but we got through it. They told us, they said, "This is what can happen again this summer, and you should think seriously about going home. It's not a failure on your part if you decide to go home, it's probably common sense. So think about it. And I can remember talking with my parents over the phone after Schwerner (9:50-9:51) had disappeared, and they were very upset. They wanted me to come home. And I said—I got to go ahead and get to it.

At the end of the second week we all got on buses in the evening and drove through Kentucky and Tennessee in the middle of the night and entered Mississippi in the early hours of the morning, before dawn. We didn't want to come over in daylight for trouble. And I had been assigned to a small town in Bolivar County which is in the northwest part of the delta, which is right on the Mississippi River in a town called Shaw. Population about 1900 people. Bolivar County, the county seat was Cleveland, Mississippi—a bigger town. But it was all prime cotton growing land. And even then, at that early a date, the cotton farmers were switching over to mechanized labor, so the sharecroppers were being displaced and thrown off the plantations.

WALLACE ROBERTS

In our particular case with Shaw, we were supposed to have a project leader—a member of the SNCC staff—leading us, and it didn't work out. We got to Louisville, Mississippi, which is about half an hour away from Shaw, and they said, “Well, you know, this guy hasn't shown up yet. So you're going to stay in Louisville for a couple nights until we can find him.” What ultimately happened was, he never showed up. We found out later that he had grown up locally in Mound Bayou, Mississippi, which is north of Cleveland and Shaw. It was an all-black community but he was—I don't even know that he had finished high school—but anyway, he was very reluctant to work with white, college-educated students. And so he kind of faded on us. And that was a shame, I think, but I understand his discomfort. I think there were a lot of African Americans in Mississippi who felt the same way, that we were a pretty strange breed. So we stayed in Shaw for almost a week and when it became clear that the local SNCC leader was not going to show up, we started to make forays over into Shaw to see if we could get the project off the ground.

Before I tell about that, I should mention the one incident in Louisville that was a really profound experience for me. Because I was the Freedom School coordinator in Shaw, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer—who lived in Louisville and was with us on the bus and had been in Ohio—invited me to spend those nights in her house. So that was nice and they found rooms for the other Freedom School teachers from Shaw in the rest of the community. The first or second night we were there, Mrs. Hamer and some of her friends fixed a group of us volunteers a big, fried chicken dinner, and it was delicious. And then

WALLACE ROBERTS

after she and her friends served us, they went off to some other meetings in Louisville. So the Freedom School teachers and I finished the dinner, and they all went to the houses where they were staying. I was there alone, and I said, "Well, I might as well do the dishes. These ladies cooked this dinner and the least I can do is clean the place up a little bit." So I did. I took all the dishes in the kitchen and started washing the dishes in the sink.

And Mrs. Hamer's husband had been out—his name was Pap. He came home and he walked by the kitchen door, and looked in and saw me, and he said, "What you doing a woman's work for?" I was taken aback. I mumbled something, but he just stormed off. So I finished the dishes wondering what I had done wrong. And Mrs. Hamer came home a little a while later, and I told her about it and said I was sorry and upset by what I had done, and what had I done? Did she know? She paused and I could see her brain working trying to figure out what to tell me. And finally she said, "Well, Pap doesn't have many ways to be a man any more." And that hit me like a load of bricks. Because what she was really saying was: she was describing the psychological damage of institutional racism. And how it especially, essentially, it spiritually and psychologically emasculated black men. I had read all the books, I knew all the abstractions and the theory about racism and segregation and how it had depressed people—oppressed people. But all that had been abstractions. I just never really encountered it in the face like that until she explained it to me. I was just blown away. I'll always remember that. I was struck by Mrs. Hamers compassion for her husband and for me and for trying to convey

WALLACE ROBERTS

to this white, Northern boy what it was really like. And that's all she had to say, and it was everything.

So we went on. We got over to Shaw, and we just started knocking on doors and explaining who we were and what we wanted to do. Could we find places for people to stay in people's houses? Could we—is there an empty building we could set up for a Freedom School? And even though there had not been much civil rights activity in Shaw before, they had heard what was going to happen this summer. So, I can't say they were expecting us, but they were not surprised. So we found accommodations right away. No problem. People took us into their homes. I moved into a home of an elderly woman, Mrs. Stella Hope, who had her grandson living with her. And a fairly nice house—many of the houses in town were unpainted shacks. But she had a modern ranch house. I found out later her son, A.C. Fisher, had a decent job as a mechanic and welder in Arkansas, right across the river, not too far away. I guess A.C. Lived over there for most of the time. In any event, Mrs. Hope gave me—insisted I sleep in her bed, and she slept on the couch in the living room. She must have been sixty—between sixty and seventy years old. I said, “No, no. I can't do that.” And she said, “No. You have to do it. You can't stay here if you don't.

And that's the way it was. I mean, these people not only brought us into their homes and risked their lives doing it, they really took care of us. It was a wonderful feeling to be welcomed like that in a totally trusted way.

WALLACE ROBERTS

[Short interruption, (18:45-19:08)]

OT: Okay? So, let's see, where were we? So what were you able to get done at Shaw?

WR: So after we found accommodations and a place that we could rent just for the Freedom School—which was just a plain, wooden shack on piers and on this dirt road—we started announcing our presence and recruiting students. And we quickly found that, in this section of Mississippi, that the high school—the students had no summer vacation. So there we were at the beginning of July, and these kids were in school because they were needed to chop cotton and pick cotton in early June and late September—and that's when they had their vacation. And they told us—they said, “We think it's great that you're here, and we really wish we could, you know, come to the Freedom School. But after a full day in school, we just don't want to do it.” The little kids were more open and more willing to hang out with us, so that was fun. We got some work done with them. The schools were not air conditioned, of course, so they were in there during the heat of the day, and at three o'clock, they weren't ready to go to more classes. So we said, “Okay, but maybe we can work something out. We'll figure it out.”

So a week or so later they came to us and said, “You know what? We really want to do, what we want to learn: we want to learn to be freedom fighters like you. That's what we want to do. Can we do that? And we want to learn how to do non-violent protests and demonstrations and things like that.” We hesitated. Because we had been

WALLACE ROBERTS

told during the training not to get the high school kids involved in real demonstrations because it was too dangerous. So we called Jackson, headquarters of the whole summer project, and we talked to the man, Staughton Lynd, who was the Freedom School coordinator for the state. And said, "Look, Staughton, we've got this problem: kids are in school, but they want to learn how to do demonstrations, what do we do?" So Staughton came up. And we talked—the teachers, and Staughton, and some of the students. We decided the students were serious enough about the purpose that we should go ahead and try it. So that's what we did.

We just turned around and taught them most of what we remembered from the Oxford training: How to organize a demonstration, how to be non-violent, how not to react to red baiting or racist-baiting, how to formulate strategy and tactics and picking the right target. All the things, you know, to bring off a direct action successfully. And then they said, "Okay, let's do it!" We said, "Okay." They said, "We want to go picket the court house and urge people to register to vote." We said, "Okay. We'll tell the sheriff what we're going to do because we should let him know." And the sheriff told us, "Well, you got to get a permit if you want to distribute leaflets. That's what this county law requires." So we said, "Okay. We've got to make out this application so we can leaflet." And we went to the county board of supervisors, and they denied the permit which is, of course, unconstitutional because it's freedom of speech—you have no right to petition a leaflet. So the kids say, "Great." Now they really have the just cause. They weren't making this whole thing up. They could protest the fact that they had been denied the

WALLACE ROBERTS

exercise of their free speech.

So we did it. We picked a day near the beginning of August, and about twelve of the Freedom School teachers—that's about most of them—and twelve of the students went in to Cleveland and set up a picket line at the court house. Some of us handed out leaflets, others marched in the picket line with signs and everything, and we all got arrested. The kids were very happy. And Stokley Carmichael, who was the SNCC staff person for the region, for what they called the Second Congressional District Region in the northwest part of Mississippi, he came over to observe the event. The cops recognized him and, even though he was just standing on the sidewalk, quite law-abiding, they arrested him too. He was mad. SNCC bailed him out right away.

But, with us, the standard operating procedure was for us to, once we were arrested, to go through the process: use our one phone call to raise our own bail money and also to alert anybody in a place of power in the North to let the sheriff know that the North was watching. So I used my one phone call to call my wife. She called our congressman, and the congressman called the sheriff's office and let him know that he knew I was in jail with some other people and that I better come out of jail alive. Somebody else in our, one of the other Freedom School teachers, had a friend at NBC news. He called him, and NBC news told the sheriff, "We got a crew on the way." That got to the sheriff. We actually had, me and a couple others of the Freedom School teachers, had actually met with him earlier in the summer when we first arrived in Shaw. He had told us at the time, "You have to obey the law but I'm going to protect you. I

WALLACE ROBERTS

don't want what's happened over in Philadelphia, Mississippi happening here.” Meaning the murder of Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman. And he meant that. We later found out we had a bomb scare at the Freedom School, and he sent deputies down in their cars to patrol. But he was not happy about having been pushed into arresting us. When I was being fingerprinted and photographed, he said to me—he knew who I was, supposedly the leader of the project—he said, “Well Wallace, are you satisfied now?” I didn't say anything. You don't talk back to a Mississippi sheriff.

I didn't then, but I thought later on, “I won't be happy until there's a black man wearing that badge of yours.”

So anyway, the next morning we were released. The sheriff had told that they were dropping the charges against us. And that felt fine. The kids were very happy that it had all gone, from their point of view, very smoothly. Nobody got hurt, beaten, and we were, of course, grateful for that as well.

And then what happened after that was: we were asked to convert the work we were doing, and all projects, I think, all the Freedom Schools, were asked to, sort of, to drop the Freedom School part of it. Or at least allow some teachers to go out into the community and register people for the Freedom Democratic party. The idea was: the Freedom Democratic party was a creation of SNCC and CORE, and the idea was to challenge the regular, racist delegation from the state to the Democratic National Convention on the grounds that it was a segregated, racist organization since blacks couldn't join the regular Democratic party. But to make it legitimate, to go through the

WALLACE ROBERTS

process, we had to get members, people on paper, willing to sign their names down saying that that they would be members of the party and not pledging to vote for county representatives. But that was the expectation: that they would be asked to go vote for delegates at the state convention at the county convention and to go through the process of picking a delegation to a national convention the same way it was done in every other state. But we had to go out door-to-door, explaining to strangers what this was about, and of course it sounds very complicated, but we did get people to sign up. We had mass meetings in Cleveland to get people to come out, and we explained it to them there. And Stokely Carmichael came over, sort of the star of these meetings, he had immediate rapport with the community and people really related to him very well because he was quite clear. He spoke their language, he knew what their fears were, and he was able to make that kind of personal connection with them that allowed them to overcome their fear. So that's what we did for, pretty much, the remainder of August. In fact, some of us moved out of Shaw and into Cleveland because that's where the population was concentrated. And then that was pretty much it.

The convention was at the end of August, maybe August 26. And probably a week before that, they said, "Okay, the work is over. We're going to concentrate on getting these folks to Atlantic City," where the convention was being held. And they wanted us to come down to Jackson for a kind of debriefing, I guess. So we did, and we were gathered into some kind of auditorium, probably one of the colleges—I can't really remember now. And there it became clear to me, at least, something that had been sort of

WALLACE ROBERTS

under the surface all summer long which was that there was some feelings on the part of some of the SNCC staff that they thought that some of us white, Northern people wanted to take over their movement. That's how they saw it. So we talked about that. And the feeling among a lot of the SNCC staff, which was almost entirely African American, was that for the black people in the South, and everywhere in America, to be truly free, the freedom movement had to be led and, primarily, staffed by black people. If there were white people, especially involved in the leadership, it would be seen by most blacks, probably, as something else that whitey was giving to the blacks. And that would not allow black people to make the mental change in their consciousness that real freedom, for them, meant. It would be colored over by the fact that this was something else that whites were highly involved in. So they said, "We appreciate the work you've done, and you've helped a lot. But we want you to go home." And a lot of whites didn't want to do that. They wanted to stay there. But I had my wife and family, so it was no choice for me. I don't know if I had been single and unmarried and no children, I might have wanted to stay.

OT: How did that make you feel?

WR: Well, I understood it. I mean, it made a lot of sense, that especially having college-educated, white people on a staff where at least half the staff had no college education and were all blacks. It would have changed the whole flavor of the organization and the organizing effort, so it made sense to me. I didn't feel bad about it at all. But it was an amazing experience.

WALLACE ROBERTS

There's one other incident I can relate to you that sort of reinforces that: Shortly after we got out of jail, it was the beginning of August, we heard—and maybe it was the same day—we heard two things. One was that they had found the bodies of Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman down in southern Mississippi. The other one was the bombing of, or the Tonkin Gulf incident, in the waters off of Vietnam. I didn't think too much about that at first. There had been tensions over Vietnam, you know, for a couple years, but it was pretty low key. But it was clear by then that President Johnson viewed this as an attack on the United States. And, of course, we all found out later, a few years ago, that it was all made up. It was not the truth. The United States Navy was not attacked. This was an excuse made up by the military to force Americans to go to war.

But anyway, these two events combined a few days later when they held a memorial service for Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman at the site of the bombed out church outside of Philadelphia, Mississippi that they had gone to investigate the night they were killed. So I drove down to Philadelphia with Staughton Lynd, Howard Zinn, and Liz Fusco, who was the Louisville Freedom School coordinator. And we got there and joined maybe a hundred of the other people involved in the summer project. We made a big circle around the burned-down church, and it was really burned down. Except for the chimney, it was just a pile of ashes in the woods. In the pines of eastern Mississippi. And people took turns speaking about their deaths and what it meant.

Some people, like Dave Dennis, were very angry about yet another civil rights worker getting killed and the action of the federal government to protect civil rights

WALLACE ROBERTS

workers and this whole situation. And I remember Bob Moses also spoke. He said, simply—I mean, he must have said other things, but what struck me at the time was his simple statement—that what had happened to these boys—Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman—was going to be happening to yellow people in Vietnam for the next few years. This was like an epiphany for me that my whole life was going to be wrapped up in this struggle. That these issues were not going to go away with one summer's action. And that it involved much larger issues than just segregation in the South. That racism was an international issue, and it was leading to a war, you know, half-way across the world, and for much the same reason. That this is the way America was. And that, obviously, has stayed with me for the rest of my life. It kind of formed, I guess, the core sense of morality that I have about America and my role and what my life work has been, which has been to do whatever I can to continue the struggle.

When I got back from Mississippi, I was scheduled to go to graduate school in Providence, Rhode Island. And I did, for about six weeks. And the unreality of the academic life was just made very clear to me after the experience in Mississippi. So I kind of looked around and said, “What can I do here?” I couldn't go work even as an organizer—not a SNCC organizer, but anywhere—because the pay was not enough to support a family. So I decided on trying to become a reporter. And I got a job on the Providence Journal and, in fact, had some skills at it, and I had good trainers. The editors there were really great and helped me to learn how to write fairly well. So that worked out really well, and I stayed with them for about four years. And I got a job in New York

WALLACE ROBERTS

at (37:45-37:46) Magazine. I was Associate Education Editor, I got to write about inner-city urban schools and suburban schools and contrast the different settings and things like that. And that was good work, too.

But it was too far from the trenches for me. I had a lot of editing work to do, so I couldn't be out getting stories all the time. So I looked around for other things to do and, eventually, I ended up working for a radio station for a while, a community radio station—public radio station before there was public radio. WBAI in New York, the Pacifica station. And that was great, but too short. But anyway, so then I did freelancing, both in Washington, DC after Watergate and in Vermont. I had moved to Vermont over that period because my wife—we had split up and she had moved to Vermont with my children. So I went up there to see them a lot. I liked it, I stayed, I made friends. And continued my journalism work, and, then once I was really settled in Vermont, I started working for non-profits and getting involved in politics. I was part, I guess, of the, what's called the “hippie invasion” of Vermont. And we did change the politics of the state. We made it much more liberal. Some great predecessors of ours in the Democratic party had begun the change in the sixties—Phil Hoff was governor—but we carried on that work. I helped out working for several organizations as a community organizer and then as an editor, again, on a newspaper, state-wide newspaper. And then I got into affordable housing development in the late Eighties, building affordable housing for low-income families. And that was a lot of fun; it was very gratifying. People were so happy to be able to move in to a newly built or a newly rehabilitated affordable housing. Their

WALLACE ROBERTS

gratitude was just overwhelming.

I got out of that later on, but I have continued writing journalism. I did some work on some national issues. I wrote for some national publications about deregulation of electricity in the early part of this decade, and on a bunch of state topics, public policy topics. And also began working again with non-profit organizations in either administrative positions or as a grant writer, which I'm doing now. Working for an agency in Burlington, Vermont that provides various services and advocacy for homeless and runaway youth. And I still do some journalism, and I'm trying to set up a website to analyze and track the growing health care costs because that's going to be the next big battle in health care reform—is getting some control over the costs of the system. And that's pretty much it.

OT: And do you have kids?

WR: Yes.

OT: And how did you tell them, or how did you talk about this experience, about going down to Mississippi?

WR: Well, I described it, you know, pretty much as I've described it to you. I think it had an effect on them. My daughter is a family therapist at the Maine Medical Center. She's a family therapist and works with, mostly with, young kids and their parents. And my son teaches philosophy and religion at Cornell College in Iowa. And he's got three children of his own, my grandchildren, and I'm going to pretty soon be able to tell the story to them.

WALLACE ROBERTS

OT: And what do you think that kids today should take away from the SNCC experience? What would you teach them about it?

WR: Well, I think I would say that all of us know deep down, whether we're religious or not or have a spiritual life or not, we all deep down know what's right and wrong. I think science is beginning to really discover evidence that we all have a basic sense of morality built into us as animals. It's just something that has evolved into human beings over time, but it's clearly there. I think to tap that sense of morality is critical for living a whole life, a peaceful life. You can be at peace with yourself if you know what you're doing is in the core with basic moral principles. And that they should be open to those feelings and try to align their lives in a way that allows them to live according to those principles. And whether it's doing service work, or whether it's doing advocacy work, or community organizing, or even going into a business but then using the money you could earn there or the time you have free from that to do work that is in accord and helps further—someway makes the society better is great, I think, and it will be very satisfying to people. People have different interests and talents, so there's no one right way for everybody. People have to find their own way, just as I did. But if people remain open, if they find good teachers, if they broaden their experience as much as they can, things will become clearer. It really happens.

OT: Great. Thank you very much.

WR: You're welcome. So this is a great project. I'm glad you're doing this.

OT: Yeah. I'm really glad that we've been having people who are willing to give

WALLACE ROBERTS

us their time. I know this weekend must be a lot of fun to see people you haven't seen in a long time.

WR: It is. It is.

END OF INTERVIEW.

Transcriber: Andrew Ritchey

Transcribed: June 2, 2010