

**Julian Bond Oral History Project
“The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-68”**

Interview with Jennifer Lawson

**Special Collections Division
Bender University Library
American University
Washington, D.C.**

2019

PREFACE

This interview is part of an oral history project entitled, "The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-1968." Unless otherwise indicated, the interviewer is Gregg Ivers, Professor of Government and Director, Julian Bond Oral History Project, American University.

The reader is encouraged to remember that this transcript is a near-verbatim transcription of a recorded interview. The transcript has been edited for minor changes in grammar, clarity and style. No alteration has been made to the conversation that took place.

Notes, where and when appropriate, have been added in [brackets] to clarify people, places, locations and context for the reader.

Biographical Note for Jennifer Lawson

A native of Fairfield, Alabama, Jennifer Lawson was a high school senior when she went with her classmates to join the student protests in downtown Birmingham in May 1963, better known as the "Children's Crusade." From there, Ms. Lawson joined the student movement at Tuskegee University her freshman year of college. In 1965, during her sophomore year, she left Tuskegee to work as a field secretary in the Lowndes County Project organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Ms. Lawson also worked in Mississippi and, later, in the national office of SNCC in Atlanta.

Ms. Lawson later went on to a distinguished career as a programming executive for the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).

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American University**

**Jennifer Lawson (25-JBOHP)
December 11th, 2019
Washington, D.C.**

**Lead Interviewer: Gregg Ivers
Secondary Interviewers: Isabella Dominique, Sarah Duval, Astonique
Robinson
Videographer: Jessica Merriman**

**Code: Gregg Ivers [GI] Jennifer Lawson [JL] Isabella Dominique [ID]
Sarah Duval [SD] Astonique Robinson [AR]**

GI: Today is Wednesday, December 11th, 2019, and we are at the home of Ms. Jennifer Lawson in Washington, D.C., to conduct an interview for the Julian Bond Oral History Project, sponsored by the School of Public Affairs at American University. My name is Gregg Ivers. I am a Professor of Government at American University and Director of the Julian Bond Oral History Project. I am joined today by three American University undergraduates, Isabella Dominique, Sarah Duval and Astonique Robinson, who will also interview Ms. Lawson.

The video of this interview is available by going to the Julian Bond Oral History Project website: <https://www.julianbondoralhistoryproject.org>.

PERSONAL AND FAMILY BACKGROUND

GI: Ms. Lawson, thank you so much for taking time this afternoon to sit down for this interview and talk to us about your own experience in the civil rights movement. We're very appreciative of you doing this. Can we begin by asking you to talk a little bit about your personal and family background?

JL: Certainly. I was born in Fairfield, Alabama. Fairfield is a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama. It's also the location of Miles College. That particular part of Alabama was, when I was growing up the center of coal and iron. There was coal mining throughout the area. There were the blast furnaces throughout. Bessemer was one of the suburbs, near the Bessemer furnaces. I grew up thinking that the sky at night was red because of all of the flames and everything from the furnaces that were nearby. Alabaster was also a product that could be mined there. It was a mining industry town at that point. It called itself the "Pittsburgh of the South." And it had the pollution of a Pittsburgh as well [laughs].

My father had come from central Alabama. He came from a farm family in central Alabama. Interestingly, he was born in 1899. He was the last of fifteen children. I never really knew all my aunts and uncles because they were really quite elderly by the time I was old enough to even think who the people in my family were. My mother had grown up in the both Birmingham and also in Marion, Alabama. Her family had been connected to educators who had helped to establish the school that later became the Alabama State University. She had more of an education. She had a master's degree and later taught school in Marion. My father was a self-taught person. He had a third-grade education and he taught himself to repair things. He worked in the coal mines and in the steel mills. But he left that to start his own business. And he made enough money through his own business for us to live a comfortable life, even though we were, by any standards, poor.

We traveled widely. We were encouraged to read, [and] we traveled anywhere you could go by car. By the time I was twelve years old, I had been to Canada several times, had been through Mexico. We would go out to Los Angeles, to Pasadena. I had traveled and understood the geography of the United States by our car trips. These were usually my parents and my two brothers. I had two older sisters, but they had already gone away to college. So that's the circumstance that I grew up in.

Fairfield was an incredibly segregated place, of course, as a part of being a suburb of Birmingham. All of Alabama was. Many of the businesses there said, "Whites Only, No Coloreds Allowed." "Whites Only, No Negroes Allowed." There were restaurants where they would take your money if you wanted to go and get food there. But you'd have to go around to the back to a window near where they took out the garbage. Of course, those were places that we didn't care to go to. We had our own little community in Fairfield. We had small restaurants that were black owned. We had a black-owned pharmacy, gas station, those places, because even the gas stations in Fairfield said, "Whites Only." They didn't even want you to drive in there to get gas. So it was that kind of place.

The community was very protective, in one sense, though. The principal of our school, a segregated school, even though we were given the hand-me-down books and uniforms and band instruments, our teachers and principals really tried to instill in us pride. I was surprised later to learn that I knew so much more about African American history than many of my colleagues and friends who had gone to much, much better schools. But we then really adhered to Carter G. Woodson's notions of what should be told about African American history.¹ We learned both the history of the country, but we also learned African American history and also had information about Native American history as well and would take trips to the mounds that are nearby in Birmingham to understand more about the much greater heritage that Native Americans had before whites came to this country.

¹ Carter G. Woodson is widely recognized as the "Father of Black History." He was the second African American to receive a Ph.D from Harvard University, after W.E.B. DuBois. Woodson's landmark book is *The Mis-Education of the American Negro* (1933). Woodson lobbied school districts and individual educators in the 1920s to adopt a Black History Week Program that later grew into Black History Month.

It was a fascinating place to grow up in that way. My family was affected by the educators, as well as many of the other kids that I grew up with, so much so that for many years we had alumni associations for our non-existent high school all over the country. I used to belong to the Washington chapter of the Fairfield Industrial High School Alumni Association. This was something where we raise money each year to send back to Fairfield as scholarships for kids there. It was in honor of the principal, who then had really tried to instill in us that no matter what our circumstances were, we should really strive to do our very best.

GI: You talked about the importance of your community. Who are some of your role models? Some of your influences?

JL: I credit my parents foremost because they, my father especially, encouraged curiosity. My mother encouraged me to read and to read as widely as possible. So, from the youngest age, I just would read as much as I could and that they would supply me with books and magazines and then tried to nurture my interests in that way. My father just encouraged this kind of curiosity about the world at large. He bought a cheap encyclopedia and would say that "If you don't have anything else to do, you should be reading that!" And I'd say, "Read what?" And he'd say, "Just any page, just turn to any page and I'll bet you'll find something interesting!" And so that became something that we would do. We would just randomly, you know, turn to a page and sort of say, "Oh, this is interesting. Never heard of this before!" We'd do science experiments. We'd go out in the countryside. This was a time when you have Wernher von Braun and the whole space age taking place in Huntsville, Alabama. Then we learned about rocketry. We'd go out on the weekends and we'd make rockets and fire off our rockets. I knew how to make the rocket fuel, which was essentially gunpowder [laughs]. Those were the kinds of things that we were just encouraged to just be curious to learn of.

As a child, I went to the Museum of Natural History in New York so many times that I thought, "Never again in my life do I want to go into that place!" If I saw those mummies, those dioramas, one more time . . . ! It was interesting to go there as an adult and see that it, unfortunately, a few years ago, it hadn't changed a lot. But it was that kind of curiosity and encouragement to just see and be interested in the world that started with my family.

I applauded the courage of some of the other adults in my community. There was an attorney, Arthur Shores, and his house was bombed several times.² They lived in an area, we used to jokingly call it, "Bombing Hill," because it was the heart of the black community. These were the people where you had upper middle-class blacks who had very nice homes. Those homes would often be the targets of whites who would then set off explosives. Shores and some of the others worked with [Fred] Shuttlesworth and the other people in

². Arthur Shores was, along with Fred Gray in Montgomery, one of Alabama's best known African American attorneys during this time. For over a decade, after his graduation from law school in 1937, Shores was the only Black attorney practicing in Alabama. For more on Shores, see *The Gentle Giant of Dynamite Hill* (2012).

the community trying to get voting rights and other rights for black people.³ I admired their courage and their willingness to continue to work in civil rights, even though it was obviously a very, very dangerous thing for them and their families.

JOINING THE SOUTHERN FREEDOM MOVEMENT

GI: How old were you when you started thinking about wanting to be involved to try to change the world that you were living in?

JL: I started thinking about wanting to be involved in changing things even before I knew that it was something that I could do. I didn't know how I would be able to be involved, but I am one of the people who thought, "What an awful world we live in!" When Emmett Till was murdered – and I think that was what, 1955, so I would have been nine years old – even then to hear the adults in my world talking about that. Probably a couple of years later, there was a man in Birmingham, I later found out that his name was Judge Aaron, he was just a worker on his way home there in Birmingham one evening, and he was kidnaped by a group of white men who tortured and castrated him. They carved "KKK" on his chest. They castrated the man, and then, to try to torture him further, they poured turpentine on his open wound. That act of putting the turpentine on, ironically, kept him from bleeding completely to death, and so he survived. As you could imagine everybody in the black community was talking about, first, the Till murder, then this brutal torturing of this man. That was in the air of the world that I was growing up in even before I knew that I could somehow do anything. It was later when Martin Luther King had come to town and there were the demonstrations. That was the time that I felt now we can do something! They are asking for young people. We're young people. We can do something.

GI: When did you first decide to get involved in the Southern freedom movement?

JL: I first became active in the movement as a high school student. I was in my hometown of Fairfield, Alabama, which is a suburb of Birmingham, when Martin Luther King was there in [the] Birmingham jail. The disc jockeys and others started announcing that they really needed people to come out in support of Dr. King. Along with some of my fellow students from high school, there were probably about eight of us, I think, who then decided that we were going to participate in the march. Our principal, the principal of the school, was so determined that we would not . . . he did not want anybody from our school participating in the civil rights activities. He locked the school. He locked the school building. We decided that we would go in defiance of this, and that we definitely decided we would go and march downtown in Birmingham and participate in the demonstrations. And we did it. We were expelled from school for doing so. We were later reinstated. But we were expelled from school. We were also arrested. There were so many people who were arrested that we weren't put in jail; but we were held at the fairgrounds in Alabama. One of my best friends,

³. Rev. Fred Shuttleworth was one of the founding members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which formed in 1957 after the conclusion of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Shuttleworth was the chief strategist behind "Project-C" in 1963, which involved a comprehensive assault or "confrontation" on racial segregation in Birmingham, which peaked in April and May of that year.

her father was a minister there who then negotiated our release from the fair grounds and also worked to have us reinstated in our high school. That was my first time really becoming an activist in the movement.

THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

GI: How exactly did the Children's Crusade come about? Did you have any concern or fear about taking part in this or did you simply want to do this because it was something you felt that you needed to do?

JL: Of course, I was going. Later, I learned of the dangers. As young people, we were somewhat naive but also somewhat uncaring about that. We just wanted change. We did not want to live under the circumstances that we were living. We wanted change. We wanted to see that change happen. We wanted to help make it happen. It was just sort of infectious that we would say, "Yes, let's do it." We left school and we went down there. We found ourselves in a real mixture of people. It was surprising just how many people were there and how many people were participating and [that it was] mostly young people. This was the march that became quite infamous because it was the time that they used the dogs, the police dogs, and also, they used the fire hoses. We had come a much longer distance. We were coming from Fairfield, from our neighborhood. None of us, none of my classmates were hit with fire hoses or were bitten by dogs. We were simply arrested. It was still kind of unnerving experience. When we heard what had happened sort of up at the front of the demonstrations, in a sense, it was alarming, but that didn't deter us. I mean, I think that if you were to ask us, I'm sure that my classmates, along with me, would have said, "Yes, we would, we'd have gone back. Day after day if we had to."

GI: Did you see any of the violence that became televised nationwide?

JL: No, I did not.

GI: Okay. Your classmates, your friends, that did this with you. They shared a similar kind of fearlessness that this was something so important whatever they might have been scared off just didn't register?

JL: Well, I think that we were a little too naive to be scared [laughs]. But I think, yes [laughs]. At our reunions, we've talked about it, and students have applauded us as heroes. There were maybe a hundred of us in our graduating class. I think that they were probably only about eight of us who then left and participated in this, and so we were a minority of students who felt this way. But I do believe that they felt the exact same way and would definitely have done it again.

GI: You mentioned that some of the administrators were reluctant to let you do this. They did not want you to do this. Were there any administrators or teachers who supported you?

JL: No, not to my knowledge. On that day, the one person who said absolutely "no" was the principal of our school. He ran this school much in the way that a headmaster at a private school would. And the teachers sort of deferred to him. He was the final word. And we saw him as sort of being afraid of the white superintendent of schools and kowtowing to the county government. But again, it was something where we didn't care. We knew that he was probably feeling that we were putting him in an awful position and compromising him. For us, the larger goal of combating segregation, of supporting Martin Luther King, was much more important.

GI: You mentioned, of course, Arthur Shores and Fred Shuttlesworth. Were there any other people that you looked up to that were influences in your community and on your decision to keep going in this work?

JL: Not so much to keep going in that work as there were people that I looked up to. We had our black millionaire, A.G. Gaston, who had made his money through the insurance business and funeral homes. He had funeral homes, and later, a hotel and some other things . . . a bottling company. He and my father were friends. Even though he was quite wealthy, he was very accessible. They would then invite us to come over to their mansion to go swimming. And his wife would come and show us her latest fashions that she had just gotten from Paris. They were our millionaires, but they were very, very, sort of friendly, down-home folks in many ways. They were not a part, for me, of the movement, but they were also people who I felt were good role models in the sense that it wasn't about money that separated them from people, but it was money that allowed them to be a part of community in a different way.

NEXT STEPS

GI: How did your experience as a high school student shape your experience to continue in the movement? And then what did you do next?

JL: I felt strengthened and emboldened from my experience in high school. I felt that we had taken a stand. We had done something that the adults at that point had said, "No, no, you can't! You shouldn't! Don't do this!" We had marched, we had participated in the movement in that small way and that we had made a contribution. And it felt good. It felt like it was the right thing to do. And it felt as though we were then finally beginning to hammer away at this awful circumstance that defined how we all lived in the United States. It was something that I felt I want to see if there are other places, other ways in which I can do more. I even thought about my choice of career and everything at that point as something that would be my way of making a contribution. I was very, very focused at that point in my life on feeling that I wanted to contribute. I wanted to make a change. I wanted to be part of the transformation in a positive way. And I kept thinking that for my people, that medicine would be an important part of that, because medical care was something that was also discriminatory. Every facet of our lives was affected by racism and segregation. And I felt that if I could become a doctor that would be one way in which I could make a contribution. So even though I was planning to go to college and really wanted to go to college, I was thinking of that, too, as a way of making a contribution.

GI: Did you graduate in the spring of 1963?

JL: I did. I graduated in the spring of 1963 from high school. Then I went to New York during that summer because my sisters were working in New York City and one of them worked at Sloan Kettering and had learned of an internship program for young people and encouraged me to apply and I was accepted. I went to New York and worked there. They were doing cancer research, and it was both a wonderful experience and also somewhat a discouraging experience, discouraging only in the sense that I would I had these fantasies that, "Oh, wouldn't it be great. I will go to school and I learn to cure cancer." Then working with these real scientists who were actually learning and working on cures, they would then describe their work and they'd worked for twenty years in some cases on some very small aspect of cell behavior. I would think, "My goodness!" I mean, it just gave me a sense of how hopeless and how massive some problems and how thorny some problems are.

GI: After that summer, what did you do in the fall of that year? Did you begin college?

JL: I returned to Alabama and I started my studies at Tuskegee. I was able to go to Tuskegee because I had won a scholarship. The Gorgas Fund had given me a scholarship. It was a four- year tuition and room and board grant to study. I then went to Tuskegee with that. Immediately after I got to Tuskegee, I found that there were students who were [already] demonstrating against some of the awful conditions in Macon County. Tuskegee was a bubble in much the way that any college campus can be. If you were on the campus, then you could be immersed in this interesting world of Greek life, sororities and fraternities, kids from all over the country, football games and parades, homecoming parades, and the like. But if you stepped five feet off of that campus, then you could be called the "N-word" in a minute. Your life could be in danger. It was segregated, even though Tuskegee itself had a large middle-class black community because it also was the site of a V.A. hospital.

You had a community of prominent doctors and others who lived there full time. It had been the home for the Tuskegee Airmen, and so it had the legend of that as well. There was a bridge out near the school, the campus where the legend was that it was where the Airmen used to zip by. So this place, Tuskegee, on one hand, could be this kind of haven and bubble of middle-class life. But the rural area [surrounding it] you could have easily thought you were going back into the times of enslavement because of the kind grinding rural poverty that was so visible there.

Around that same time, I read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. I felt that it spoke so well of the reality of Tuskegee, including the statement in Ellison's book about the statue of the founder on Tuskegee campus. There is a statue of Booker T Washington and that he supposed to be lifting the "Veil of Ignorance" from this enslaved person. I think Ellison says something to the effect that you can't really tell whether he's lifting the veil or pulling it back over.

GI: Would you mind talking a little bit about what you just said? I think it's really an important statement, but it might not be clear what you mean by what you just said.

JL: For me, the interpretation of that in part was the kind of controversy that was also about Booker T. Washington and the kind of education that he was advocating of black people, his kind of leadership versus that of W.E.B Dubois. Dubois was much more of a person who was saying that we must educate ourselves to be leaders. We must educate ourselves to control our own destiny. Booker T. Washington was saying that it would be real practical if we learned how to do these things that could make us good service people for the white world, that we should be pleased and proud to do these things. That was the whole question of Tuskegee as this kind of agricultural place made famous for George Washington Carver and all, but of a place that was trying to help people fit into the world as it existed, rather than to challenge that and to change it.

GI: After your first year at Tuskegee, you went to Mississippi, as I understand it, to take part in the Mississippi Summer Project. What led you to do that and at what point did you actually become part of SNCC?

JL: I didn't go in the summer. I went in the fall, actually of [19]64. That would now be the summer of 1964, when the students were actively participating in the what was called "Freedom Summer" in Mississippi. I was in New York again following it very closely in the *New York Times* and other newspapers. My heart was in Mississippi. You had the whole mystery of the three missing civil rights workers as well. I had been offered that internship again, and so I had taken advantage of that and gone to New York City. I was of mixed minds in many ways, because, on one hand, I felt, here's a once in a lifetime kind of opportunity to go here. They were encouraging me to think about going to Cornell Medical School. I had this new world in New York City around Sloan Kettering [Hospital] that had a great appeal to me in many ways. But I also felt that I should be in Mississippi, I should be in Alabama or Mississippi, and being a part of the change that's needed there.

When I went back to school in the fall, my first contact – I became active with the student group at Tuskegee. And we had a student group, the Tuskegee Institute Advancement League, I think it was called. T-I-A-L. It was our student group. A young woman, Gwen Patton was another one of the student activists. Sadly, most of the people who were in the group have died – some died during their time in the movement or have passed away from natural causes. Unfortunately, most of the people have passed away. Gwen Patton, Wendy Paris, Simuel Schultz were some of the other students who were a part of this. Kathleen Cleaver was as well. We were working there at Tuskegee on things that were happening in the county. Michael Lomax, who is now head of the United Negro College Fund, his mother ran a newspaper and she published his newspaper from Los Angeles that was about then some of the events that were taking place in Tuskegee and the surrounding area.

Through her work, I learned of this professor there, Dr. Gomillion. I went to meet with him because I wanted to understand what was happening around Tuskegee in that way. He then explained to me gerrymandering – which, until then, I had never heard of – about how the vote was being suppressed there. I started, in my spare time, going out into the rural areas around Tuskegee and Macon County and working on voter registration. It was a small group of us, including Samuel Younge, Jr., who would then go out and we were trying to

register as many people in the Macon County area to vote as possible. That was what I started the school year doing in '64. Some people from SNCC, and I don't recall precisely who – want to think that William “Winky” Hall was one of the people and Jim Forman at some point – they came through and were asking for student volunteers to go to Mississippi to help them with registering people to vote and getting out the vote in Mississippi. And they now were getting ready to go through this challenge of the Democratic Party, the 1964 challenge that the Democratic Party. I then volunteered to do that. That was another one of those moments where I didn't think of myself as, “Oh, I'm a woman. What will I do?” It was, “They need people? I'll go.” I didn't think of myself in that kind of gendered way or anything, but I volunteered, and volunteered not knowing where I was to go and stay for like a couple of weeks.

I didn't know where I'd be staying or what. But I was more than willing to go and do that. I went to and worked in Jackson, in Hinds County, Mississippi for those couple of weeks to do that.

GI: Was that experience like for you in Mississippi, in Jackson specifically, and then maybe in some of the outlying areas?

JL: I was mostly in Jackson and that's when I became so impressed with SNCC. That was my first time seeing SNCC in action. It was really SNCC and COFO, some from CORE. There were some of the other groups, remnants of them, still there. But the people that I remembered most were SNCC people and that I was just in awe. I mean, I was like a groupie at a rock concert would be now just sitting there hearing these incredibly intelligent young men and women who were like my age or a couple of years older, actually. But they were like maybe eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old. They were talking about politics in a way that was just astonishing to me. There was so much clarity and they [had] so much awareness of the world. It was quite impressive to me.

GI: Anyone in particular you remember who impressed you?

JL: No, it was just the whole sort of ambience among them to the group. There were people like these women, Annie Pearl Avery and Cynthia Washington. At that time, all of the women usually, Judy [Richardson], all of them, they wore blue jeans.⁴ I don't think there was a dress anywhere near the area! It was a self-confidence that they exuded that I thought was just incredible and that they could talk about what needed to be done and organize themselves to do it. It wasn't as though they needed an older adult to do anything. I found that quite impressive.

GI: After you finished your short tour in Mississippi, you returned to Tuskegee?

JL: That's correct. I returned to Tuskegee and I attempted to do a balancing act of continuing my studies. I was studying chemistry, biology. I took courses at the School of Veterinary Medicine there. I remember taking a parasitology course there . . .

⁴. Judy Richardson (JBOHP-03) was interviewed for this project.

GI: I'll take your word for it because I have no idea what that is.

JL: I also took botany courses. And I enjoyed my studies. I liked learning, and so I enjoyed my studies very much. But I was also doing the balancing act of trying to continue to be a real part of the student group there, too, with Gwen Patton and George Ware and the other students. George Ware was a graduate chemistry student there. But he was older, a little older, and he had an apartment off campus. We would often use his apartment as a place to have our meetings then. We'd go and meet there and talk about what we were going to do in terms of our civil rights work in the county. Most of that was focused on the county unless we weren't really trying to change the school. There were some places where some students really wanted to change their universities and changed the curriculum and things. We were much more focused on trying to eradicate racism in Tuskegee beyond the campus and in Macon County. We would have those meetings. Gradually, more and more SNCC people were beginning to come to the county and to meet with us, and so we would have these meetings there.

I'm not quite sure of the chronology I have. I would have to do some research to find out. At one point, there were people like Martin Luther King [who] came through, Malcolm X came through. I had the opportunity to meet both of them. Malcolm X spoke there, but I'm not quite sure what year that was. I want to think it was during a time when I was still an actual student there. I was doing this balancing act, which I continued all the way up to early . . . I think it was really I'd have to look up the year again. I'm terrible with years now! But one of my classmates was killed. This was Samuel Younge, Jr. And that was rather a defining point for me. It was one of those times when I decided that, "Okay, you have to make a decision. You can't be half-in or not." I decided that I would leave school and work full-time with SNCC. That was after Sammy was killed.

GI: The murder of Mr. Younge is not terribly well-known outside of a small circle of people. Why was that so impactful to you and other people within your world?

JL: Because he was a college student who was then working, like the rest of us were, on voting rights and going out, canvassing in the county and all. To have him be murdered was to again reinforce our collective vulnerability. In my view, it was that if this could happen to Sammy, it can happen to any one of us, male or female. It doesn't matter. It could happen to you.

GI: And that led you to go to work for SNCC full time?

JL: That's correct.

GI: What exactly do you mean when you say, "I went to work full time for SNCC." What's the transition from being a student activist, part-timer, volunteer, to taking that big plunge?

JL: The big difference is that, when I was a student at Tuskegee, I had a tiny little studio apartment off campus. My day was going to classes and then doing my student activism.

Once I said, "This is what I'm going to do," suddenly, I had a sleeping bag! I had a duffel bag with a small amount of clothing in it. Now, I was going to live with a group of people, many of whom I did not know, in a Freedom House. I was going to get up in the mornings and go out into a field, possibly, a rural area, and knock on shacks and do this sometimes the surreptitiously, because we didn't want the people to be evicted from the places where they were sharecroppers. I was going to try to meet as many people as possible to encourage them to come to a mass meeting where we would then try to encourage them to register to vote. But so that's now how my world was shifting and was shaped towards that. I worked first in Wilcox County and lived in the Freedom House there with a group of people. I was very fortunate because shortly thereafter I had a car because my father – remember, if I can fix it, I can have it – I had a car. Shortly thereafter, though, after I went into the movement, then SNCC assigned me a car so I then could go with driving my group from Wilcox County to meetings in Lowndes County. We would be meeting with people from the other different counties. And it was through meetings that I got to know, Stokely and Courtland Cox and Ralph Featherstone, Bob Mance and some of the other people more. They then asked if I would leave Wilcox County and come to work with them over in Lowndes County.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A SNCC FIELD SECRETARY

GI: Can you take us through a day in the life of a SNCC field secretary, like what you did, the fear that might have run through you? How were you received by the people of the houses you knocked on? What was that like to go through that almost day after day? Was it exhilarating? Was it frustrating? Was a combination of both?

JL: Yes, it was. It was a real mixture. I'll use Lowndes County as an example, but this Wilcox County group could easily have been the place as well. You'd get up in the morning and then you would go out. You'd meet. You'd have a small meeting. But a small meeting would be sort of everybody who's living there, working there, gathering and sort of saying, "Okay, let's look at the map. Where are you going today and what part are you going to cover and where will you go? Why don't you take the car? Drop me here. Drop this person here, and then we'll all come back at this point. I think I can get a ride with this person. I'll need you to pick me up. Or we were coordinating. And this is no cell phones, remember [laughs]. This is no landlines even, practically in these areas, in these circumstances. You can't call somebody on the phone or anything. You've had to work out where you're going to where are you and how will you move from one place to the other? Because you're talking about counties, rural areas that are spread out and that there are hostile whites driving around in pickup trucks with gun racks, and so you want to be well aware of where you are in your surroundings and everything. We usually would have met on Sunday at the church. Some people who then would say, "Oh, yes, well, you should come and talk to me and I'll introduce you to my cousin who lives down in this place or something."

That's how you were mapping out these contacts and making contact with people. I remember once going and spending the night with the family because the only time that I would be able to really talk with them was that night. They worked the fields. They were picking cotton. They worked the fields during the day. The only time that we could talk was

at night. They brought some other people over. Then we talked about why it would be important to go and register to vote and what we could gain from voting. That was how you spent your day.

You come back in the evening to the Freedom House, where we stayed, and those would be your moments of entertainment and levity. Somebody would sometimes have a record player and you could put on a 45 or a stack of 45s, and you'd have music. You'd dance and joke around and flirt. That was the fun of it all. I remember once as a fun moment, a group of us – there was a creek nearby – and a group of us on a Saturday, we went swimming in the creek. That was your leisure. You had very little leisure because you were usually really busy with these meetings and you spent a lot of time with the local people. These were the adults, the families that had invited you to come into the county. They would then usually tell you about meetings or about developments within the county. You would then sometimes feel that, "Oh, that merits a mass meeting. We should get everybody together for a mass meeting to talk about this." Or here is an opportunity for someone to run for an office or something. That could be the occasion for getting together.

GI: Were you, to your knowledge, under surveillance? Were you ever being followed or watched by whites in the community, by people who didn't want you there?

JL: Yes, quite often. You couldn't avoid it, really. Most of these counties, particularly in Black Belt Alabama, is kind of like – often, it's not even like rolling hills and mountains or anything – it's flat land. You can see sometimes great distances away. You couldn't really avoid it. Wearing my blue denims, you kind of stood out. It was like our uniform. But it also made us visible. And I, as a young woman with an Afro, definitely was quite visible. Sometimes it was a big Afro, too [laughs]! You were quite visible in some cases.

I should go back [to] the time before I left Tuskegee. One of the activities that we, as Tuskegee students, became involved in was with SNCC. I was not *in* SNCC at this time, but I was very much working *with* SNCC. I was working with SNCC as a Tuskegee student and this was during the time of the March between Montgomery and Selma, and that around this time then Martin Luther King had decided that they wouldn't march, but that we then went from Tuskegee. During those days that they were trying to decide about whether they are going to march – this is the [Edmund] Pettus Bridge after John Lewis and others were injured there – we'd go down to the Alabama state capital in Montgomery, which is a relatively short distance from Tuskegee, and we would protest there.⁵ We would – students – would march around with our picket signs. I don't even recall what our picket signs said.

⁵. Ms. Lawson is referring to the first march from Selma to Montgomery on March 7th, 1965, known as "Bloody Sunday," for the violent and brutal response of law enforcement and deputized posses to the approximately seven hundred marchers. The violence and beatings were later televised on national news program, drawing condemnation from President Lyndon B. Johnson and other national leaders. The outrage was international in scope. Two days later, a second march was attempted but never processed past the Pettus Bridge. That aborted march is known as "Turnaround Tuesday." On March 21st, thousands of marchers processed to Montgomery, arriving four days later. The original purpose of the march was to honor the memory of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a twenty-six-year-old veteran and local voting rights activist. Jackson was shot by an Alabama state trooper on March 18th protecting his mother from an assault. He died on February 26th.

But we were marching around there and one day when we were doing that, the Klan decided to have a counter protest. The Klan started coming up the hill towards the Capitol. We were then marching in our loop right there.

The state troopers are sitting there smacking their billy clubs on their hands, like, [smacks her hands together] "Can't wait to use this on you!" Now, to add two things: Here's the Klan coming up the hill. That was a rather frightening moment because we were beginning to worry about *us*. This small group of Tuskegee students, the Klan, the state troopers with their billy clubs and everything in it. Before the Klan reaches where we are, one of the troopers said, "Arrest them all!" [They] arrested us. We were, on one hand, horrified to be arrested. We had gone through our training. You knew that if they said that they were going to arrest you, then the safest thing to do was to go limp, which would be sort of falling down like a rag doll. Then they would carry you and toss you into the police van.

We did that. We were talking in the van about how it was, on one hand, it was terrible to be arrested, but it was a relief not to be confronted directly by the Klan because we were really afraid of what might happen if the Klan had actually reached us. We certainly didn't think that [the troopers] were going to defend us. It was one of those odd moments in life where it's like, "Oh, good, we're in a police van. We're heading to jail, and not at the mercy of that group!" I spent almost a week, I think it was, in jail. During the time of the actual Selma to Montgomery march, then, we were in jail. I have, in the Alabama archives, my mug shot is there. They now have it. It's available as part of their archive. I have my mug shot to thank for that. And as a reminder of when I was an inch taller and many pounds lighter.

ORGANIZING IN ALABAMA: THE LOWNDES COUNTY FREEDOM PROJECT

GI: Let's talk about some of your work in Lowndes County and in particular some of the voter education tools that you came up with, along with your colleagues, to promote the voter registration project there.

JL: Sure. In 1965, Lowndes County became an important project for SNCC. It [is] the largest county right between Selma and Montgomery. It's a county that has had a horrific history of lynchings and violence against Black people. It was often called Lowndes, Bloody Lowndes, Bloody Lowndes County. Even though the county was majority Black, they were only four registered voters. There were people who were interested, particularly John Hewlett, who had registered to vote in Birmingham, Alabama, and had moved back home to Lowndes County. He was interested in getting people registered. He had invited SNCC to work in the county, and I then came along with the others in SNCC to work there. Our first work was really getting people registered to vote as a part of that. We needed to create materials and that, in addition to the lack of opportunity for voting, the education was just horrible. I mean, people had very little access to education in general. You had a high illiteracy rate among adults there and, of course, the poll tests. They would use these poll tests to keep people from voting by asking them to recite information or to give information. You had a lot of people who just had never had the opportunity become educated and so couldn't read or write symbols then. This was whites as well as blacks. In that context, symbols for political parties become quite important.

The symbol for the Democratic Party in Lowndes County was a white rooster. It's the logo over where it says white supremacy for the right. It was this white chicken. When John Hewlett and the other people, when they were talking about creating the Lowndes County Freedom Organization and we asked them, "What do you want as your symbol? Then they said, "What we need is a mean old black cat to run that white chicken out of this county." That's when they said, "You know, this part of Alabama, it used to have panthers in it and everything, and so a black panther would be just perfect as the symbol."

We had Stokely [Carmichael] then ask the people at the Atlanta office if they could send something. We needed an image to use. They said how about a little panther that was on the outside getting ready to leave. We thought, "Yeah, well okay, we'll use that." It turns out that was the Clark College football mascot.⁶ That was their symbol. That was the logo from Clark College. We adapted that to use as the Lowndes County Freedom Organization's symbol, which then some people would refer to it always as the "Black Panther." Because we really wanted people who couldn't read and write to know how to vote for their party, we then started seeing on the posters, "Pull the Lever for the Black Panther." We were concerned about violence at the polling place, we wanted to get across the message, "Pull the lever for the panther and then go home." Somebody said, "Well, it would be great if we could get this out rather than handing out flyers, if we could get that message out in a bigger way." And I said, "Well, if you can get me some lumber, I could make billboards, I could draw. I can draw something small. I can draw something big. We could make billboards and posters." I made about three billboards that were posted around the county. There's a photo of one of them where there's – they were immediately shot up, as you might well imagine – so there is a young man from, I think, Philadelphia who had come down and he's standing there with a rifle, a young black man to protect the billboard. But then Courtland Cox and I would talk about how we could help the candidates.⁷

There were people who were saying, "Well, you know, I don't think I would could run for sheriff because I don't know what a sheriff does. Or to be the tax assessor. What does a tax assessor do?" Then they [would] say, "How can we decide whether Mr. Pine could be a good tax assessor or not if he wanted to run? What's the job?" We got the information about the jobs from the courthouse and we then converted that into comic books because we thought the images could help tell the story and would force us to keep the text really small. When I drew the comic books, that would then tell the story of what the sheriff did, what the tax assessor did. I would just draw those and that I did the same. Courtland [Cox] had this essay that he had written called, "Mr. Black Man, What Good Does It Do for You to Have the Vote?" It was about, "Why Vote?" That was the real theme of it. I illustrated that as well and did that as a comic book about why it's important to vote and how voting can give you power and that you then can be the people who control the county government, the county budgets and things. It was a fun thing to do.

⁶. Clark College, now Clark Atlanta, was, in 1965, one of the six Black colleges that made up the Atlanta University Center.

⁷. Courtland Cox (JBOHP-4) was interviewed for this project.

I never had any formal training in art. This was again, just that kind of can-do attitude that comes from childhood. I remember once a friend had a Monopoly [game] set and I thought, "What a fun game! I want one!" My father said no way that he would ever spend money for something like that! I borrowed her game and made myself one. I just took the time and made all of it.

I wish I had it now because I could sell it as folk art. But I made the [play] money. I made all of the pieces. I just made it and looked at the box and how that was made and constructed it. It was actually on a full box, a full set. I didn't know how to draw really. But those were things that I would just do. If we needed a drawing, then I was willing – unless somebody else stepped forward –to do it. I made then the billboards, the comic books and this material. It's nice to see it now. There's some of it in the interpretive center there.⁸

GI: When you look back on that period of the Lowndes County Project, was it a successful project?

JL: Yes, it was. I went back to Lowndes County about a year ago and interviewed some of the people there and [asked], "What did it mean for them?" Because to me, to define success, you have to have [to ask], "Who is this success for?" It was really wonderful to be so warmly received by the people in Lowndes County. I was surprised that they would even remember or know who I was. But to be so warmly received by them and for them to talk about what it meant for their own lives. It helped them to establish, retain jobs and create jobs within the county, to have those offices then in the county government. There were horror stories! I was sad to hear of ways in which some people allowed themselves to be manipulated in some cases. They may have had the power in one sense, but through economic means, they were really still sort of at the behest of others of the white minority in the county. It was interesting to see what Lowndes County had become in many ways.

THE LEGACY OF JULIAN BOND

JL: After Lowndes County, I moved to Atlanta and worked then in the Atlanta SNCC. Obviously, working in the Atlanta SNCC office meant that I met then Julian Bond!

Julian was there as well as some other fabulous people. Karen Spelman, who lives here in Washington now, Ethel Minor, who had been Malcolm X's secretary and who was working there at the SNCC office. The SNCC office was just a place where there was never a dull moment because there were people constantly coming through from New York or from the field in Mississippi [or] Alabama. It was just always full of activity, full of energy. The printing press with Wilson Brown was always going full steam ahead. Julian was in the midst of all of this energy and activity. Julian was always "Mr. Cool, Mr. Calm" and with an incredible sense of humor as well. I treasured Julian so much throughout the years for his

⁸. The Lowndes County Interpretive Center is part of the Civil Rights Trail between Selma and Montgomery, Alabama, and operated by the National Park Service. You can learn more about the key sites preserved by the NPS by going here: <https://civilrightstrail.com/attraction/lowndes-interpretive-center/>

political savvy, his intellect. I mean, he could nail it just really quickly of what a problem was and be so incredibly articulate about it. And then later he could be so funny, just so warm and funny. I really, really valued him as a person.

I thought that he contributed so much to SNCC. Even though he was one of the young people, there was a maturity that he brought to it. Then there was an expectation of a kind of professionalism that he brought to his work. That meant that the standards he was setting in in many ways affected all of the people who worked, whether it was on the *Student Voice*, [which was] the SNCC newspaper, or whether it was in setting up communications or press opportunities or managing the press. Julian was always so masterful about all of it. It was my pleasure that living here in Washington in later years, we were able to continue that friendship. I saw more of him when he was working with another friend of mine, Aviva Kempner, about her film about the Rosenwald schools, and that Julian made himself so available to Aviva. She and Pam [Horowitz] became good friends as well.⁹ But it was to me just another example of how generous Julian was with himself to always be giving of that. As we were setting up our SNCC Legacy Project here within the last few years that then Julian was also very, very active in helping to contribute time and energy to that.

GI: I've heard Julian described as the griot of SNCC. Is that a fair assessment?

JL: Yes. I mean, I would say he was more of a poet in some ways. But yes, it would be a fair assessment to say that Julian definitely carried forth a lot of SNCC stories. I just regret that his life was cut short before he was able to really tell so many of them in forms that would just continue to live on and on. I think that he really cherished his being in the classroom. I think he enjoyed that more than he enjoyed his role with the NAACP and other organizations, because I think he really enjoyed what we called transferring the wealth, the intellectual wealth. You know now in families when a family is incredibly wealthy, they want to make sure that the wealth is handed down to the next generation? I think Julian felt that we, as SNCC people, had an intellectual wealth that we could give and that that was something that he saw the classroom as a very useful place for contributing that intellectual wealth to a new generation.

I think that the primary legacy of Julian Bond to the movement was the clarity and the elegance with which he conveyed the lessons from the past threw himself to students and young people of today.

PART TWO

In Part Two of this interview, American University undergraduates Sarah Duval, Isabella Dominique and Astonique Robinson conduct separate interviews with Ms. Lawson on topics of personal interest to them.

⁹. Pam Horowitz was Julian Bond's second wife, to whom he was married from 1990 until his death in 2015.

Interviewer: Sarah Duval

SD: Would you consider yourself to be part of the Emmett Till generation?

JL: Very definitely, in the sense that when Emmett Till was murdered, my classmates, my family, all of us were so affected by that and by what had happened to him. And it was the horror of it. We knew of other lynchings and things. But there was something so horrific about this that it was something that my entire community was talking about. We were all just appalled and very definitely focused on this. It didn't matter to me that Emmett Till was a young man. That wasn't the point. I mean, this was a black person. This was a person. This could have happened to any African American, and that was something that was just alarming and frightening because I was quite young. To hear a fall of the people, my parents, my family talking about this was just quite alarming. What a world! What kind of world do we live in? It's interesting because we had relatives, we visited relatives who lived in other states or other people would come to visit us. There was this notion among some people that, "Oh, my goodness! Mississippi is a scary place." That was so insane to me. I lived in Alabama. Alabama was a scary place.

SD: I can imagine.

Interviewer: Isabella Dominique

ID: There's a chapter I read in a book about Fred Hampton's murder and there's a quote from Fred Hampton that where he talks about being twenty and willing to die for the movement to pretty much put everything on the line for Black Freedom. And it's a concept that I think was very strong during the civil rights movement and something you definitely showed in your willingness to be expelled and definitely put yourself in dangerous situations. But I think today a lot of student activists, at least I know we don't really share that same level of, I guess, willingness to take a risk at all, especially when it comes to our education or even our lives. And I've been kind of grappling with why that might be. I mean, I think a lot a large part of that has to do with the fact that we always say like our ancestors fought for the right for us to go to school, like we should never give that up regardless of what the situation may be. But I'm also not sure if it's just a different time. And the way racism looks today is obviously a lot different than it did back in the '60s and '50s. What your take is on and maybe why student activists today or even activists in general, even if they aren't students, I think that willingness to risk our lives, our education isn't necessarily present.

JL: I'm not so sure that that's the case. I meet student activists and I meet young people who are very active with Black Lives Matter or BYP 100 or other organizations who I think are making enormous sacrifices, because just to be politically active these days usually means that you're working with a nonprofit organization or you're living at a subsistence level. I mean, these are not people who are driving Teslas or, you know, jetting off to some exotic place for vacation. I do see students who are – not necessarily only students – making enormous sacrifices for their political beliefs or to further what they feel is a necessary

cause. I don't want to for anybody to over-romanticize what we did. First of all, a lot of people will say, "Oh, when I see these films and things of the past, I see all of these people."

We were always a small group of students. It wasn't as though the entire campus of Tuskegee or the entire campus of my high school were activists know out of one hundred students in that year's class. There were probably only about eight of us who were then willing to go and be expelled and to participate in a march. And I certainly don't think that it is necessary for people to put themselves in harm's way in order to do political work and to be active.

I don't think I would encourage it. I wouldn't advocate that for anyone. I think that there are certain circumstances that almost happened to us where we have to protect ourselves and we have to be alert that we could be affected by. But I think that we, first of all, what we did was only part of what needs to be done and what the people of the other generations before us did, that they did what they could. Now we've done what we could, and we're handing it on to generations to come, to do more and to do other things. But I don't think those other things have to echo or be the same as what was done in the past. I would. I'm glad nobody has to go and integrate a lunch counter. Yeah, so that's out of the way.

But economic justice, equal pay for women. People who are transgender feeling safe as they are. There are so much that still needs to be done. I do believe I'm optimistic. I believe that other young activists will do those things, too.

ID: But I think something that I'm also struggling now, too, is just how many different organizations there are that seem to do the same thing in a way, but also different organizations have different ways of doing that. So I think like Black Lives Matter and like NAACP, I don't know, just like a lot of different organizations where a method is different, but also like the mission is the same. So for me, I would love to, I guess, see more like unity in the movement, but also I understand that it's kind of difficult because it also really even happen in the '60s. But how how can you still, like push for change and like work together as like different organizations with different methods?

JL: Well, it's a little while ago I was telling you, I think about how I at one point had wanted to work in cancer research and how I thought, oh, great, find a cure for cancer. And that how then I met these scientists who had been devoting over twenty years of their professional lives working on some small aspect of the cell behavior or something or doing what was going to contribute to finding a cure.

But certainly, that one thing would not be enough. I think that's in many ways the same situation that we're in, that the problems that we face, the problems of inequality, of injustice, they are so enormous [that] it's impossible for one organization to tackle them all. And it's great that there are some organizations that say, I am interested. I feel that far too many black people are criminalized and arrested in this country. I'm going to work against mass criminalization. So that's a cause they're somebody that can work on that. In Lowndes County, I know a woman who is passionately working to try to get environmental justice for the poorest people who live in Lowndes County, where the water table is so high that it

backs up the sewerage into their homes. So that's her cause. A worthy cause, particularly in that environment. There are kids who are chronically ill because of that problem. She's working on that. Good for her. Let her work on that.

We don't have to have them all in the same organization for them to be effective. And I think that particularly today, when we have the kind of communications that we have, we can learn what she's doing, and we can see sometimes that there might be overlap or connections. That's a good thing. But I think it's great that we have people who say, "Ah, this is my passion. I will work on this," and that they don't have to be under the umbrella of the same organization. In a few months, we will hold a convening here in Washington, D.C., which will commemorate the 60th anniversary of the founding of SNCC. But it's one where we are hoping to bring together well over a thousand people who will be activists from different walks of life and who are working in different parts of the country and on different issues, some environmental issues, some LGBTQ issues, others education. Bob Moses, he believes that algebra is the solution! He really does! He believes that educational inequities, particularly the lack of numeracy – that we focus on literacy and he believes in algebra – that if people aren't literate in math, don't have that kind of math literacy or numeracy, then they are at a disadvantage. There is room for all of this, I think. And I don't think that it has to we have to wait until there is some great leader who then can take us all under her wings and sort of say, "This is where we need to go. This is what we need to do!" Maybe that person will show up at some point and we will want to follow her or him. But it doesn't have to happen. We can still move forward, right?

ID: Right. You mentioned in your first answer that there were only eight of you working in the Children's Crusade out of about one hundred [students], and it sparked some curiosity about, I guess, your siblings' involvement and if your family was supportive of what you were doing and kind of what their role was?

JL: My older brother had left for college by that time. My younger brother was four years younger, and so he was too young [laughs]. My parents, my mother passed, had died a few years earlier. My father was the parent in the house, and he was opposed to it. He was definitely opposed to it. He was not alone. He was with all of the other adults in the community. That they would have their meetings. They were all Republicans you will be interested to know. But that wasn't unusual then, because in the South at that time, the majority of blacks were Republicans because the Democrats were Dixiecrats and were part of the white supremacist grouping. He and his other friends and coworkers and everything were very definitely opposed to our participating in the march. Let's not forget that the original call had been for adults to go and march in support of Martin Luther King. And they did not go. It fell upon us [laughs].

ID: Right. So my last question is about, I guess, how you were able to balance being both a student and then also an activist and what that balance looked like? And if you were any time kind of feeling like maybe you did feel this because you ended up not being a student, chose [the] activist route at some point. But I don't know, because I think at least in my student leadership right now, like I tend to like the school part on the backburner, like I still do it [laughs]. But I think a lot of times my energy is initially always directed toward the

activism part, but it just makes it difficult because, I don't know, I feel like I tend to over exert myself like on activism side, but not any other aspect of my life. How did you work to balance that?

JL: Well, I learned as I went along. And I feel that. It was a valuable lesson, a valuable life lesson for me, not just about balancing the school and the activism. I mean, I think I could have continued to balance that. After my classmate Sammy Younge was killed, that I just made a decision that, no, I can return to my studies. I really felt that I could return to my studies. And I also felt that what I could contribute through medicine, other people could give, that there would be other people who would be doctors, but that the number of people who were willing at that point to then stand up to this kind of injustice, to stand up to people who were murdering unarmed college students, that there was to me a lack of people who were willing to do that.

I was willing to stand up at that point to do that. But I think I could have a balanced that. I balanced other parts of my life as well. Because during all of those times, I was also a young person who was romantically inclined and also had relationships with people, too. I had a boyfriend, so that was also a part of it. That was a balancing act as well. But I felt that it was important to have to not see yourself as being so singularly focused that you couldn't do but one thing at a time. I felt that I could manage these things, that it meant carefully using your time. I felt that I ended up with the best of both worlds in many ways. And I can say that became a useful life-lesson that helped me professionally later as well. I was able to also have a career as well as a family later in life, and felt that I was a good parent, a good wife, and also did well in my profession. I just could manage those things. But that was a lesson that I was learning and continue to learn.

Interviewer: Astonique Robinson

AR: I have a couple questions for you. Based on your experience, the first is about your transition, living in both Northern cities and in Alabama as well. I want to know what the transition was like for you because you mentioned that you went back and forth to New York City to do internships and then to come back and go to school and then also work with SNCC. What were some of the similarities that you saw between the two in terms of racial animus? And then what were some of the differences that you saw?

JL: In that particular time – we're talking in the mid-1960s – and at that time Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, the South was very visibly segregated. I mean, very, very visibly segregated in ways that were much more of what we would associate now with something like old photos of apartheid South Africa, with colored and white signs over everything and places where you knew that you could never go. When I was a child, we traveled a lot as a family, and we would travel from South to North and from Alabama to California. I thought we were having so much fun because we went camping when we were traveling. We'd camp out and we would cook out of a campfire. And I thought, this is so much fun. And it dawned on me later that reason that we were doing that in those Southern states and places was because we could not stay in a hotel or motel. We could not eat in many of the restaurants. These are the places that would be identified by something like the Green

Book that were in the black community where you could eat. But there was no way that we could pull up to a Howard Johnson's in a Southern area and eat. On the other hand, in New York, that was a world where it was quite possible that we could go to Radio City Music Hall. We could go to the museums. We could go places. The world was very different in that way for me, whether it was the north or whether it was Los Angeles, a major city like L.A. It was a world of far greater possibilities. I had white colleagues on my job when I was doing the internship at Sloan Kettering that had friends who were white who would then invite me to go come over and hang out with them and their roommates. We'd go to the U.N. with some of them worked. It was just a much broader, much more open world where for many of the people that I would encounter, race did not matter.

I was not oblivious to racism in the North, however, and I knew that it very definitely existed, and it was very obvious to me. I think that living in the South, at that time, my antennae were finely tuned. You could easily go to a place and you could see, "Oh, okay, here these people and these white men, they work in these offices and all the black men are carrying mail or doing something. They are the worker bees, but none of them are in the corner offices. It was quite obvious. And this was true, too, of places where people lived. I knew there were neighborhoods that you could see that they were all-white in some places in the North and New York and other places and still are, right? There were people, you'd meet them and talk, and they would say, "Oh, you know, you're the first black person who's ever been in my house!"

I understood that the sort of racism that is so ubiquitous throughout America isn't isolated to a certain place. It's not something you can say, "Oh, what a shame! Alabama! That must be tough, right?" No. We are all in it. It's the world that we all live in.

AR: Staying on the point of location, I want to know if your family ever considered leaving Alabama for a place that would have been maybe more progressive or safer, and if there were other people in your community that did make that move to leave Alabama for other parts of the country?

JL: My family never considered it. I think part of that was just the fact that my father was older. My father was born in 1899. In 1955, my father was fifty-six years old - yeah, [laughs] - so he was getting towards retirement age rather than the age of thinking that, "Oh, I think I'll move to New York and start living there!"

He had daughters, my sisters, who were living in New York City, and they were well established in New York. But it was not something that my immediate family was thinking of. We had a large number of relatives and friends. Every summer, there was always the joke, almost, of seeing the cars from the North come down [because] people would come back to visit relatives. They would come in their cars from Detroit, Chicago, New York, Buffalo, wherever. They'd come down to visit their family. This was the evidence of what we now call the Great Migration, where people moved North, but they still maintain those ties. But my family did not think of doing so, but there were any number of families who very definitely moved for the opportunities of jobs and a better life.

AR: My final question for you is about the different roles that people play in movements. In many movements you'll find that there are people who are a bit more reserved to try to stay out of the crossfire a little bit, not because they're not supportive, but maybe because of fear. And I'm wondering, did you experience that in Birmingham or in Fairfield? How did those people show their support, even if it was not as outward as some of the people who were in SNCC?

JL: Well, they're always the people who do quiet work for many, many years. There was a woman, for example, who was the librarian at my high school. Her name was Mabel Neely. She hired me at one point to be her driver. I think this was her way of trying to give a poor girl a few dollars, but also to keep me out of trouble. She knew where I was on Saturdays and on the weekends because I was driving her to business and professional women's meetings around the state.

These women would meet in Montgomery or in Anniston, Alabama – these different places. As the driver, I would sit in on these meetings, [but] I was just sitting on the sidelines. I could then overhear their conversations, though, of them talking about the circumstances of racism, the circumstances of our people and what they were doing about it. They were not picket sign-holding people. These are the women with their little white gloves and their nice hats and things. And Miss Neeley telling me, "You think I'm sleeping, but I see how fast you're going!" So it was that kind of relationship.

But it was also something where it was a wonderful observation because I followed the quiet role that she was playing and that later led me to work with Dorothy Height. I worked for - I guess it was probably 1969 - with the National Council of Negro Women. And I worked with Dorothy Height, Fannie Lou Hamer, Unita Blackwell in doing rural economic development work for women.

And it was helping rural women, very poor women on farms and sharecroppers to help establish and invest in projects which would give them some economic stake. [Doing] that kind of work. Dorothy Height was another one of those [women]. Miss Neeley was at this level [holds her arms even with her neck]. Dorothy Height was the queen of that kind of quiet movement person. Our cities are filled with people like that.

AR: Thank you.