

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

Interview with Leslie McLemore

**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 Leslie McLemore

A native of Walls, Mississippi, Leslie McLemore got involved in the Mississippi student movement as a freshman at Rust College in 1960. Dr. McLemore helped establish the first NAACP chapter at Rust and soon organized sit ins, boycotts and other protests in Holly Springs and Marshall County to protest racial segregation in public accommodations. By early 1961, Dr. McLemore was working with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other civil rights organizations under the umbrella group, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), which had begun to establish a state-wide voter registration project. After graduating from Rust in 1964, Dr. McLemore worked on Julian Bond's 1965 campaign for the Georgia House of Representatives before earning his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Dr. McLemore taught for over thirty years at Jackson State University, and also served on the Jackson City Council from 1999-2009. He is a founder of the Fannie Lou Hamer National Institute on Citizenship and Democracy.

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“The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-68”
American University**

**Leslie McLemore (24-JBOHP)
October 31st, 2019
Holly Springs, Mississippi**

**Interviewer: Gregg Ivers
Videographer: Jessica Merriman
Production Assistance: Jessica Merriman**

Code: Gregg Ivers [GI] Leslie McLemore [LM]

GI: Today is Thursday, October 31st, 2019, and we are on the campus of Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, to conduct an interview with Dr. Leslie McLemore 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. Dr. McLemore was president of the campus NAACP chapter at Rust College and a leader of the Northern Mississippi student movement from 1960-1964. He also worked closely with the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) during his time in the movement.

GI: Dr. McLemore, let me first thank you for taking time this morning to sit down and have this conversation about your role in the Southern civil rights movement and to hear you offer your impressions of Julian Bond. Thank you very much for doing this.

LM: You are so welcome.

PERSONAL AND FAMILY BACKGROUND

GI: Why don't we begin by having you tell us about your personal and family background?

LM: I grew up in a place called Walls, Mississippi, which is in DeSoto County. Most of my grammar school years were spent in Walls. Then I went to school in Memphis for a while. I spent my grammar school years between DeSoto County, Mississippi and Shelby County, Tennessee, going to school. And my mother and grandfather were the principal people and models in my life. My grandfather was my male role model. He was a local landowner in the town of Walls. He was one of the few Black people who owned land in the town. He was an independent entrepreneur. He owned a cafe, a barber shop, and he was also a landlord.

He was sort of one of the leaders in a town and in the in the Black community. He was probably one of two or three leaders in the community. He provided sort of a leadership role model for me. And my mother was a young, outspoken woman who lived in the community and she worked in Memphis primarily. She upholstered furniture. She worked in an upholstery factory in Memphis for a number of years. On the side, she had a truck, so she would haul workers to the fields, the cotton fields there in the local community. I grew up in this small farming town, basically a plantation community, because there were large farms surrounding the town. But we happened to live in a little town where we had a couple of stores and a post office. So that was sort of the basis of the town. The saving grace for the town was the fact that we were very close to Memphis.

When I was growing up, we lived thirteen miles from the city limits. Going to town was going to Memphis. So that's where we did the grocery shopping. That's where we shopped for clothes, all of the things associated with commerce. Those things were conducted in Memphis primarily, although the county seat was Hernando. But Hernando was a very small town. And of course, that was where we had the county courthouse. To conduct any business that involved Mississippi my grandfather would go to the county courthouse in Hernando, but if he had to conduct business in Tennessee, of course, he would go to the to the county courthouse in Shelby County, Tennessee. I grew up in a family that was fairly independent within the normal circumstances of being Black in Mississippi, growing up in the '40s, in the '50s.

My mother and father divorced when I was very, very young. I really never spent time with my father. It was my grandfather, my mother, my grandmother and one stepfather, in particular. But I really picked up my cues from I think from my father, my grandfather and from my stepfather to a certain extent. But the thing that delivered me, quite frankly, was the love of books, the love of reading, being a member of the Walls Chapel, CME Church and my grandmother and my mother taking us to church or going to church with them. I had a younger brother, a couple of years younger than me, and the two of us grew up together.

When I start thinking about being in DeSoto County, growing up in Walls and in Memphis, I really attribute my grandfather, my mother and my grandmother and the Walls Chapel CME Church to a certain extent of helping to shape me into the young person that I was at the time. Of course, growing up in the Walls Chapel CME Church, I was forced to do speeches. I was forced to participate in church activities. As a kid growing up, I had a stutter, or what they would refer to now as a "speech impediment." So growing up in that church, in spite of the speech impediment, my mother and my grandmother insisted that I give speeches at Children's Day, Mother's Day or Easter or whatever day there was in the church and there was an opportunity to give a speech, my brother and I were a part of that.

I went to high school in DeSoto County, at Hernando Central High School, starting in 1956. Hernando Central High School was a two-room school building in a series of churches. In 1956, before I left Hernando Central in 1959, the county had built a school for Black folks in Hernando, a regular school building. In my senior year in high school, I attended Delta Center High School in Walls, Mississippi, my hometown. The good citizens, the good white

citizens of DeSoto County, built a school for Blacks in Hernando, the county seat. They built a school for Blacks in Olive Branch and they built a school for Blacks in Walls.

I rode the bus from Walls to Hernando. I went to school my senior year at Delta Center. I was involved in high school activities. I played on the basketball team, did stuff like that, but it was really my experience at the Walls Chapel CME Church had sort of driven me toward leadership.¹ Before I graduated from high school in my church, I was assistant superintendent of Sunday school, and I was also a Sunday school teacher for the young adults in my church. In high school, I was president of my class. I was president the freshman class, sophomore class, junior class. My senior year at Delta Center, I was president of the student council.

My [civil rights] movement experience actually started in high school before I came to Rust [College]. In high school, as president of the student council, we protested at the school around the fact that, number one, we didn't have the Negro history books in the library. Number two, we had too many faculty advisers on the student council. The principal was trying to control us. He had three or four teachers as faculty advisers trying to control us in this community because – we're talking '59 moving into 1960 – there was civil rights activity in Memphis, but nothing in this small town, this small farming community, because there was nothing to integrate in Walls. We didn't have any cafes. We didn't have anything like that.

I got involved with trying to remove some of the faculty advisers from the student council, which was one of our issues. Negro history books with the other issue. And the third issue was the major issue, quality of food and cafeteria, which is always a good one [smiles]. I led a boycott of classes [laughs] during my years as student council president [laughs]. When I came to Rust in 1960, I had some movement experience. I had several teachers from Rust [continues to laugh] who were graduates of Rust. I was influenced, more or less by them. I had one teacher in particular, a Reverend Burton, who by chance had a sister who was on the faculty here. She was the art teacher.

Our teachers took us to several different schools. We went on a field trip . . . we came here to Holly Springs. We came to Rust, then went across the street to Mississippi Industrial College. I went down to Mississippi Valley State University. That was called Mississippi Vocational College at the time. And then I applied to Tougaloo and I applied to Morehouse. When I graduated from high school, I had acceptance at Rust, Mississippi Industrial, Tougaloo, Mississippi Valley and Morehouse. Rust offered me the best deal financially. Rust offered me an academic scholarship and a band scholarship, and I played trumpet in the band. I actually came to Rust and didn't pay anything for four years! I went to college free.

¹. The CME Church (Colored Methodist Episcopal) was founded in Jackson, Tennessee, in 1870 by freed slaves. It should not be confused with the AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church, which was established in Philadelphia by Richard Allen and the Free African Society (FAS) in the 1790s. The AME Church was rooted primarily in the Northeast and Midwest, while the CME Church was located in the Southern states and remains concentrated there. The CME now stands for Christian Methodist Episcopal.

ARRIVING AT RUST COLLEGE

My grandfather and mother said, "You got a full scholarship at Mississippi Industrial, got a full scholarship at Rust, and you got a partial scholarship at Mississippi Valley, partial scholarship at Tougaloo and a partial scholarship to Morehouse. My mother and grandfather said, "It's a no-brainer. You got a full ride to Rust." I came here. I'm the first person in my family to graduate high school, of course. My mother was a tenth-grade scholar. My grandfather was a fourth-grade scholar. I was elected freshman class president and went, in the middle of the first semester, went to a meeting of leaders on the campus. The year before I got here, there had been some discussion about civil rights activities, some discussion about boycotting the local theater, etc. I was a part of the leadership team. I got involved as a freshman.

During March of 1960 we boycotted the local theater downtown. From that, I got involved in voter registration through the activities that we were sponsoring on campus. Between 1960 and 1962, I met Bob Moses, Aaron Henry, Medgar Evers, Frank Smith, Jr. and a lot of other people in SNCC. Between '60 and '62 my life was transformed. I got involved in the movement, got involved in voter registration through primarily the NAACP. There was a man that lived in Holly Springs, Mr. S.T. Nero, a retired teacher and the first president of the Marshall County NAACP that was formed back in 1953. Mr. Nero was our mentor. He was retired, a graduate of Clark College in Atlanta. His wife, Mrs. Nero, taught sociology on the Rust College faculty, so he was on the campus every day. He was our advisor. We formed the first college chapter of the NAACP in February 1962. Medgar Evers came to the campus and installed the offices. I was the president of the NAACP on the campus. Mr. Nero was our informal adviser.

Then it turns out that Aaron Henry's brother in law, Merrill Winston Lindsey, was the college chaplain and the pastor of Asbury United Methodist Church. In '62, Reverend Lindsey ran for the U.S. Congress from the 2nd Congressional District. He challenged Jamie Witt. That same year, Reverend R.L.T. Smith ran for the U.S. Congress from the 4th Congressional District. The two of them, Reverend Lindsey and Reverend Smith, were the first Black folk to run for the Congress since Reconstruction. That was a big deal. This was a scheme developed by Bob Moses to increase voter registration. Aaron Henry was Reverend Lindsey's campaign manager. Aaron Henry, at that point in time, was state president of the NAACP. He had become state president in 1962. Lindsey and Smith married two sisters. They were brothers-in-law. Aaron came to the campus often, so I got to know Aaron through, of course, the NAACP and even better through Reverend Lindsay. Reverend Lindsey's daughter was my classmate here at Rust.

GI: Did the Rust student movement form in a homegrown way or did you take for your inspiration some of the other movements that had been breaking out across the South?

LM: It was a combination of activities going on in other places. But when I arrived here in the fall of 1960, there had been some movement activity – at least some discussion of movement activity – on the campus at Rust. Like the students at Rust, we were so close to Memphis. Our television stations were based in Memphis [and] our radio stations were

based in Memphis. We got our news from Tennessee. We knew that there was activity in Memphis and there was activity in Nashville, in particular. And of course, there was activity in other places.

In terms of if there was any modeling, *per se*, it was based upon what was going on in Memphis. If I go back to my high school, the 1959-60 school year, the principal was uptight about activity at this country school because he knew what was happening in Memphis. There was nothing to integrate in Walls. There was nothing to do in Walls in particular. But Memphis was the place. It was the urban center. That's where we got our news from. So here in Holly Springs, in '59 and then moving into 1960, they clearly had started formulating some plans. There was a guy named Willie Peacock, Willie Wazir Peacock, who was here at Rust when I got there. He was two years ahead of me. Peacock was a part of that group with Baines and others who had been talking about civil rights activity in Holly Springs. It was based in Holly Springs, home grown. And when I got here in 1960, Mr. S.T. Nero was already here. Remember now, there had been the formation of the Holly Springs Marshall County chapter of the NAACP in 1953.

Now, how much above ground it was, I don't know. But Mr. Nero was president. So that means that people were registering to vote in Marshall County and Holly Springs, but there was no voter registration drive, no activity. This was done on the quiet side, which was primarily how it was done in most of the rural areas throughout Mississippi. But in 1954, Medgar Evers becomes the first full-time field secretary of the NAACP. From 1954, moving forward, the NAACP takes on a different role because Medgar Evers began to form and establish chapters of the NAACP throughout Mississippi.

So that activity and I just happened to arrive at this place at the proper time. I really should have finished high school in 1958, but I went to country school that put you through different grades and status. I arrived here as a twenty year-old freshman. That was the beginning of activity really across the country. Between 1960 and 1964 were just the dynamite years in the movement in the South – in Mississippi, in particular, because of the central role that Medgar and of course, Myrlie [Evers], too, played with the NAACP. I had the opportunity with the formation of the chapter in 1962. Remember, prior to '62, we were engaging in voter registration activity. We did not know exactly what we were doing in terms of being scientific, but we were knocking on doors. Between the 1960 and 1962 was the first time in the history of this county, in this town or this area, that black folk were going door to door trying to register folk to vote.

GI: Was there any concern or fear?

LM: Of course! There was great fear!

GI: Doing this in public . . .

LM: There was great fear! On the other hand, we were aware that voter registration was going on in other places because of the fact that Aaron Henry was here. He and his brother-in-law were here. Mr. Nero was here, so we had these leaders who were encouraging us

and then we were brave enough. It was the people in my class, the class of 1964. We were the people who were knocking on the doors primarily. We were really the leaders, the folk in my class. In fact, I style ourselves as the greatest class in the history of Rust College!

GI: And now we have that on record.

LM: And now we have that on record [laughs]! We have to keep repeating it. That's the key. You have to keep repeating it. And we will. We were involved in activities. The NAACP campus chapter, we got involved in voter registration. We got involved in a speakers bureau. And when Frank [Smith] came to town, Frank had a SNCC car, so we [now] had a SNCC car. We had Mr. Nero's car and we had a car occasionally of a couple of other faculty members. Not only could we go into the various churches with the speaker's bureau, we could actually go into the community and pick up people and transport them to the county courthouse. And that had never, ever been done before.

We started that between 1960 and 1962. If you look at the Mississippi movement, and you think about 1961, and you think about the McComb [County] Project, it's important in the Mississippi narrative to remember that, in 1954, Medgar Evers was the first permanent full-time field secretary of the NAACP. That that's important within the context of movement history in Mississippi. It's also important to remember that Bob Moses and that group in McComb in 1961 started the McComb Project.

GI: What was the McComb Project?

LM: The McComb Project was a voter registration effort started by Bob Moses, Hollis Watkins, Curtis [Hayes] Mohammed, Marion Barry, Reggie Robinson and Chuck McDew – all of the legends of the civil rights movement – because a lot of those folk had been Freedom Riders. A number of the Freedom Riders went back to wherever they came from. But [many] of them stayed in Mississippi and a lot of them went to McComb. They started this voter registration project that emerged out of the McComb Project in 1961. It's been described as two schools of thought. That was the voter registration effort that was advocated primarily by Bob Moses. And then there was the direct-action group that was primarily advocated by Marion Barry. The direct-action group wanted to integrate the bus station, wanted to integrate the lunch counters in McComb, etc. And, of course, that aspect, that wing appealed to the young people.

If you listen to Curtis Hayes, Mohammad, Hollis Watkins or Robert Talbot tell that story, they were excited about the fact that they could integrate the bus station or integrate the library or integrate a restaurant. The person that invited Bob Moses to come to McComb was C.C. Bryant, local president of NAACP. Mr. Bryant wanted to register people to vote because that was the reason that Bob Moses had come to McComb. That was the rationale that Bob Moses had discussed with C.C. Bryant and Amzie Moore. When he came to Mississippi, Amzie sent him to C.C. Bryant in McComb because Amzie said to Bob that

Bryant is better organized in McComb and you would probably have more success in McComb, but it was about voter registration.²

But then the younger people, the Marion Barry group, wanted to do direct action. The McComb project and was centered around voter registration and direct action. But the important thing is this is that McComb was this systematic, sustained above ground movement in Mississippi. Now, March of 1961, the Tougaloo Nine was the one of the first public protests in the effort of those nine students from Tougaloo College trying to integrate the public library in Jackson.

Of course, now you know that prior to the Tougaloo Nine, there were the “wade ins” in Biloxi [led by] Dr. Gilbert Mason, Sr. If you look at the Mississippi movement, the “wade in” deal was an episodic thing. It was not something that somebody was organizing around every day. Biloxi was splashy. It was courageous because they were trying to integrate the beaches in Biloxi. On the other hand, McComb was sustained. The library protest was episodic. They went to integrate the library under the leadership of Medgar Evers in 1961. That was an episodic event. But McComb was sustained. It was organizing on the ground. So that's why it is so important within the Mississippi narrative. But McComb, with the door-to-door community organizing, getting people in the community involved in voter registration and in the direct action and to protest and course out of McComb.

If you are tracing the history of the Mississippi movement between 1960 and 1964, McComb is important – the McComb Project. Because from McComb, SNCC goes to Hattiesburg, SNCC goes to the Mississippi Delta. And in the Delta, you’ve got Fannie Lou Hamer, you’ve got [Willie] Wazeil Peacock, you’ve got Sam Block, you got all those folk that constitute some of the local leadership and later a part of SNCC. If you talk about what happened later, if you talk about the Freedom Vote campaign, if you talk about the Lindsey Smith campaign for the Congress, you go back to McComb. And then if you talk about McComb, if you talk about 1962, you talk about Medgar Evers, you talk about Bob Moses, you talk about Dave Dennis, you talk about COFO and then COFO provides the umbrella.

GI: What does COFO stand for?

LM: The Council of Federated Organizations. COFO becomes the organization that provides the umbrella for SNCC, the NAACP, CORE, primarily and at least name wise, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. SCLC was part of the umbrella, but it was really SNCC, NAACP and CORE, with the presence of Dave Dennis and Medgar Evers and Bob Moses. And then after the assassination of Medgar, of course, Charles Evers, his brother, came back to Mississippi. The McComb Project is central to what happened in Mississippi moving forward. In the history of the Mississippi movement, because some of the names that I mentioned are people who played major roles later on in SNCC and in the movement, not only in Mississippi but across the country. At one point, Charles Sherrod was there. Charles

². C.C. Bryant and Amzie Moore were revered figures in the Mississippi voter registration movement dating back to the 1950s. Charlie Cobb (14-JBOHP) discusses Bryant, Moore and also E.W. Steptoe and Vernon Dahmer in his interview for this project.

Sherrod left there and went to Southwest Georgia and started the Southwest Georgia Project. You had just a combination of people who were doing a variety of things after that.

THE ARRIVAL OF SNCC

GI: Was there any resistance on campus to when SNCC people came in? I mean, you're an NAACP person. What was the response of people on campus who had been active in getting this movement started when it started kind of accelerating a little bit when people came in from other places?

LM: Frank Smith came to Rust during the summer between my sophomore and junior years. I came back from working in Memphis that summer. And Frank was here. Frank was really embraced by the president. Dr. Earnest A. Smith. None of this would have happened without Dr. Smith's blessing. Frank had established an office on campus. In fact, the lady who was the Dean of Students, a Miss Nicholson, was so much impressed with Frank she gave Frank an office in one of the girls' dormitories. That was unheard of. Back in that day, you didn't have any mingling of boys and girls on a black college campus. Not in 1962. That didn't happen.

Frank was embraced by the administration, by Dr. Earnest Smith. I guess if there was any pushback, it was probably from faculty members, those who were not active in the movement, who had some concerns. I remember one of my college roommates, Dr. Raymond Davis, who now lives in North Carolina, said to me, "Mac, this guy, Frank, has come back and he's taken over."

I said, "What do you mean, Raymond? He said, "Man, Frank is doing this, Frank is doing that. So that's when I met Frank. And Frank is a charmer! "

GI: That he is.

LM: Frank is a talker!

GI: He's both a charmer and a talker.

LM: So [laughing] he had all the charm, so I was drawn in almost immediately! And he had a car! He had a SNCC car! We became fast friends. The idea of the speakers bureau was something that – Frank was not here for that long – was part of what we developed. We would go to the churches on Sundays, we would go to a lot of the churches on Wednesday evenings during the Bible study and midweek service to do voter registration. This was after I had actually been to a voter education registration workshop in Dorchester County, Georgia, sponsored by SCLC. That's where, in 1963, later on, through the through the NAACP but primarily it was SCLC, at Amzie Moore's house. We left and went from Amzie Moore's place and went to Georgia. When we got to Georgia, Andrew Young was conducting the workshop along with his wife, late wife Jean Young and Dorothy Cotton. Hosea Williams was the principal speaker. He was leaving the federal government at that time and was becoming a part of SCLC.

On that bus ride from Amzie Moore's house to Dorchester County, Georgia, I met Fannie Lou Hamer. Fannie Lou Hamer had been evicted from the Marlow plantation in 1962. So less than six months after her eviction from the Marlow plantation, I met Fannie Lou Hamer. When we got to the workshop and in Georgia, we, of course, were introduced each other's eccentric center, etc. We did role playing and all of that, singing Freedom Songs. Fannie Lou Hamer absolutely blew everybody away because she had a story to tell when we got to Georgia because she had been evicted from the Marlow plantation. That was the first great story she told of her eviction.

So that captured the imagination of all of us. This was a combination of local people and college students. There were several of us from Rust that went to the workshop because, remember now, we had been conducting voter registration activity here in Holly Springs and in Marshall County. But we were not using the scientific method. We were not as systematic as we should be. We were doing voter registration, but we were not doing voter education.

GI: What exactly do you mean by voter education as opposed to voter registration? Walk us through that a bit.

LM: Well, it was what do you actually do when you go door-to-door to conduct a voter registration drive? How do you approach the person about registering to vote when you speak to Mr. Jones:

"Mr. Jones? My name is Leslie McLemore. I'm a student at Rust College. I want to talk to you about voter registration. Are you a registered voter?" And the answer, of course, is no. "Have you attempted to register to vote?" The answer is no. "I have here, Mr. Jones, the form that you need to fill out if you are to become a registered voter. Do you really want to be a first-class citizen?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, if you register to vote, then you become a first-class citizen."

We went through the process of going line by line, question by question, through the form. We were doing it one-on-one. But what we learned through the Andrew Young, Jean Young and Dorothy Cotton workshop is that we did the role playing that I just described. They also taught us something about finance. They taught us something about voter education. We talked about what would have been the at that time national affairs, what was going on in the rest of the country. We had really this immersion in education. Then Andrew Young introduced us – Andrew Young can really sing, too – to all of the freedom songs that we were learning and [also] learned new songs.

But then Fannie Lou Hamer just took over. Fannie Lou Hamer was really a minister without portfolio. She had a terrific singing voice. Not only did she sing but she sermonized, too. She provided the center of activity. When she described eviction from the W.D. Marlow

Plantation, she talked about her life, that narrative.³ That is really when Fannie Lou Hamer emerged, from that workshop. Because she had been around the country initially doing some fund raising and speaking and stuff for SNCC. We left that voter registration workshop, and all the way back on the drive from Georgia back to Mississippi we sang and we sang. Fannie Lou Hamer led the songs. It was just fantastic. I was so impressed with Mrs. Hamer. I remember calling my mother and telling my mother that I had met this great woman who was absolutely dynamic. I just remember, quite frankly, doing the course of that week, so many times I have been brought to tears. It just it was like being in church!

But you were talking about social justice, you're talking about equality, you're talking about freedom, right? And it was just amazing. We would do the workshops, then we would have dinner and then we would have an evening session after dinner. This was singing and this was storytelling. This was, oh, it was absolutely amazing! You can imagine that when four or five of us from the college got back, we were reinvigorated because we started doing voter registration in a much more holistic fashion. We were registering people one-by-one going door to door. But then we discovered very quickly that we needed to organize these gatherings.

Going to the churches on Wednesday nights during a prayer meeting in a prayer service, we had gotten permission from the ministers prior to coming. That gave us the opportunity to do voter education at the churches. That's when we went over the form. That's when we made a point over time when people felt comfortable enough to say, "Okay, I am ready to go to the courthouse to register." We were able to do that by working with the local ministers in those churches that would let us speak and would give us the opportunity to set up the workshops.

That's really where you really learned how to work with the local community. And we were involved in all that activity and we were encouraged by the president, Earnest Smith. We had no repercussions at all. Of course, one of the reasons that that I didn't go to one of the state- supported schools, because I'd been admitted to Mississippi Valley, was my high school teacher, this guy, Reverend Burton, told me, "McLemore, you wouldn't last a minute, because if you go there talking about all the civil rights stuff, they're gonna evict you. They gonna expel you from school." He said, "Your best bet is to go to Rust or a private school." The great opportunity was to come here, and I had to freedom to profess and freedom to engage in activities. It was because we had this enlightened man who was president of the college. And that really made a difference in all of our lives.

³. The W.D. Marlow plantation, located in Ruleville, was among the most well-known and profitable plantations in the Mississippi Delta. In August 1962, Mrs. Hamer, along with seventeen other residents of the plantation, boarded a SNCC-secured school bus and traveled to Indianola to attempt to register to vote. The entire group, with the exception of Mrs. Hamer and one other man, were denied entrance into the courthouse. Mrs. Hamer and the other man were permitted a form and take the literacy test, which, of course, they failed. Upon her return, W.D. Marlow confronted her and demanded that she promise not to register to vote and stop trying to organize others. She refused. After eighteen years on the plantation, Marlow evicted Mrs. Hamer and her husband, "Pap," who she married in 1944. Mrs. Hamer went on to become one of Mississippi's most revered civil rights activists, becoming a SNCC field secretary at age 44.

FREEDOM SUMMER

GI: When did you first become aware of the Mississippi Summer Project and what was your reaction to it?

LM: Well, after the 1963 Freedom Vote campaign – the Freedom Vote campaign laid the immediate foundation for Freedom Summer for the 1964 Summer Project – I was involved here in Northern Mississippi to get people to vote for both Aaron Henry for governor and Ed King for lieutenant governor. The Freedom Vote campaign provided, of course, a venue and an occasion for activity by all of us who were involved in the movement here in Holly Springs and Rust.

There was a core of us, the speakers bureau people, the NAACP people-type, all of us were sort of “the movement” at Rust. It was not like we had everybody in the student body involved in a movement. That was far from the truth. But the core of us who were involved in the NAACP, the speakers bureau, had gravitated much more to SNCC towards the end. We were, that core group of us, including the guy that I mentioned earlier, Dr. Raymond Davis, we were invited to a SNCC meeting in Greenville [Mississippi] in the winter of 1963. At that initial meeting of all of the SNCC people at the Catholic Church there in Greenville, that was when I was a part of the first big debate or discussion about whether or not we should engage in the 1964 Summer Project. I remember that meeting. There was Howard Zinn, to throw out a name. There were just a variety of people there. And it was, as I recall, a two or three-day meeting.

Of course, we took food there at the at the Catholic school in Greenville and we lived in the community. That's when we had really the initial long-term conversation and debate, whether or not people whether or not we should invite the students this Duke and whether or not it ought to be sponsored. A lot of the homegrown, home-bred Mississippians were against the 1964 Summer Project. I know in particular now Hollis Watkins walk was one of the persons against the 1964 Summer Project. Wazeil Willie Peacock was against them coming to Mississippi. Of course, the rationale was that they would overshadow the local leadership because they were concerned about really what had been done already. We had made some strides in getting people registered to vote because people were working with the local leaders. Fannie Lou Hamer was one of the persons who clearly wanted to invite the students to come to Mississippi to be a part of the Summer Project. You had varying views. And obviously this was an idea that Bob Moses had been kicking around. Bob Moses [had come] up with it.

Bob Moses was clearly the visionary in a whole lot of ways. Frankly speaking, I think Bob's idea, Bob's convincing argument of what it would do for Mississippi, what it would do for the movement, the publicity that we would get, the “buy in” that we would get from the nation at large if we had some of these white college students coming to Mississippi who were well connected because their families were authorities in different places. They came from all over the country. The argument made by Moses obviously prevailed in the final analysis. The Summer Project provided the possibility of local leadership meeting and working with these college students from across the country. And then the projects that

Bob and the local leadership had identified – voter registration, community centers, the Freedom Schools – all of those projects had a tremendous impact in terms of moving [things] forward.

Also, we were introduced to so many other people who were central to what was happening not only in Mississippi, but across the country. All of the civil rights heavyweights ended up coming to Mississippi. Out of that activism was clearly the implementation of the Freedom Schools as a part of the Summer Project. This was the brainstorm of Charlie Cobb, [and it] had a tremendous impact. The Freedom Schools really turned out to be one of the long-lasting impacts of Freedom Summer. Not only did the Freedom Schools provide an avenue for the young people, but so many of the adults got involved in the Freedom Schools. This idea of whether or not, pro or con, Freedom Summer, was one of the great debates in the freedom struggle because it provided an avenue for development across the board. If we think about it in a very serious way, when SNCC began to organize in Mississippi, SNCC had the good sense to tap into the local leadership.

And just think, going back to 1954, this local network, this local leadership had been developed by the NAACP and Medgar Evers, Aaron Henry, and all those people who were in the leadership of the NAACP. When you mention the [E.W.] Steptoes, the Amzie Moores, and the C.C. Bryants of the world, these people were a part of the local NAACP. That network was there. When the young people came to Mississippi to work on the 1964 Summer Project, they lived in the homes of so many of these people who were a part of the NAACP network. The very foundation of Freedom Summer goes back to the groundwork that had been laid by the NAACP in terms of local leadership.

So, in a very real sense, some of the people were shortsighted in terms of the quality of the local leadership, because the young people really didn't replace that local leadership. Most of them were here just for that summer. Of course, some of them came to Mississippi and stayed. Some of them are still here! But, on the other hand, that local leadership had been established years prior to Freedom Summer. It is just so important not to overlook the contributions of the people who provided the foundation. And that foundation develops out of these people who were here in the '50s and '40s, etc. Those veterans who returned from World War II, the Medgar Evers of the world, the C.C. Bryants of the world, and the Amzie Moores of the world who had been a part of the local community in a way that they had influenced people in these rural communities and small towns that you'd never heard of! Freedom Summer was built upon the foundation that those people had been providing.

And then this mystic comes along whose name is Bob Moses. This mystic comes along and says, "This is a vision that I have in order to transform one of the most difficult places on Earth to bring about change and to bring the Freedom Movement to Mississippi." Bob Moses and his vision and the role that COFO played in this process helped to develop the movement.

The central voice, in this instance, of Ella Baker, in terms of Miss Baker's impact on Freedom Summer and Miss Baker's impact on the Freedom Democratic Party, just Miss

Baker's impact on the development of SNCC, and her impact on SCLC. Her impact on young people who were clearly the leaders and the foundation of what was happening throughout the American South. Ella Baker, in her ability to listen, demonstrated that leadership is not always about the person who's the loudest, who's talking the most, but the ability to listen. And clearly, Ella Baker had this amazing ability to listen and then provide ideas and then to provide direction.

Of course, Bob Moses has that same ability, the ability to listen, but also the ability to reflect. Reflection is so important. Bob Moses' leadership clearly had an amazing impact because Bob Moses was not the loudest guy in the room. [Lawrence] Guyot was the loudest guy in the room [laughs!] Bob Moses provided that kind of quiet leadership. That vision, the visionary, the mysticism in him really helped bring about Freedom Summer. And out of that, all the activities – the [Mississippi] Freedom Democratic Party, Freedom Schools, community centers, voter registration, etc.

GI: Do you think Freedom Summer was a success?

LM: I do. Yes, yes, I do. If you look at traditional measures, of course not, because if you look at how many folk we got registered to vote and how many people were we able to help in terms of economic development over time, no. But in terms of lasting impact, because we are talking about Freedom Summer fifty-five years later today – it happened fifty-five years ago – so we are [still] talking about that because of the impact it had. The election of blacks to public office in Mississippi, the development of the black middle class in Mississippi, the development of the HBCUs – the historically black colleges and universities in Mississippi – Freedom Summer had a tremendous impact. The people who stayed, who made contributions to the economy, to the political system, all of that comes to mind. It provided the history that helped to fundamentally change Mississippi in ways that we probably don't realize, even today.

Between 1960 and '65, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the impact that Freedom Summer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had on the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which has not really been given the appropriate and proper credit. On the other hand, those activities helped to really change it. It changed Mississippi have to change America. So that gathering of those young people for that Summer experience in Mississippi have changed to change the nation. I think by all measures, it was a success.

THE LEGACY OF JULIAN BOND

GI: Why don't we finish up our conversation by talking about your impressions of Julian Bond. You met him in the 1960s. What kind of impression did he leave with you?

LM: Well, I met Julian back in 1962. Bob Moses came from Jackson, and in Jackson he picked up the president of the SGA at Jackson State, the Student Government Association President at Jackson State, who is now a medical doctor living in Houston, Texas. He picks me up. I met Bob – obviously I had met Bob Moses before – and I met Dr. Johnson, Jimmy Travis and Bob Moses and myself. We rode from Holly Springs, so I was the last person they

picked up. He had Travis and Doc in the car when he came up from Jackson. We rode to Atlanta. I went to a SNCC meeting in Atlanta with Bob Moses. SNCC had moved into a new office, new space, and Julian Bond was there. Julian Bond was describing [how] SNCC had gotten a new mimeograph machine.

GI: That was a big deal back then.

LM: Oh yeah, yeah! Absolutely. SNCC had gotten a brand-new mimeograph machine . . .

GI: You could smell those a mile away.

LM: There you go! There you go [laughs]! So Julian got up there and was talking about how this new mimeograph machine was so much faster than the old one, and how many copies they could produce at such a speed. He explained in some detail [laughs] about this new gadget that SNCC had gotten. So that was my first real introduction to Julian. And, of course, he described – Julian had this great sense of humor, right? – so he was describing [laughs] this new mimeograph machine. That was my first introduction to Julian.

I met him in Atlanta at the new SNCC office and got to know him because he was the publisher and chief bottle washer [laughs] for the *Student Voice* newspaper. When I first voted in DeSoto County, he did an article on it. I talked to him on the phone and I described the scene, voting, etc., etc. I really got to know Julian. We were about the same age. I was a student here at Rust. I don't know – we just became fast friends and I would often see him at all the gatherings. We were political junkies. Julian was one of the few people in SNCC who really had a real interest in politics. I mean, if you think about all of the people that SNCC produced, there hadn't been a whole lot of us who ran for public office and won, actually.

There was this sort of what I have described as the political wing of SNCC and that political wing was very small. Charles Sherrod was on the City Council in Albany. Frank Smith was on the Board of Education and [also] the City Council in Washington, D.C. Of course, Julian was in the state legislature. John Lewis was on the City Council. Then, of course, he became a congressman. I was on the Jackson (Mississippi) City Council.

So it's not a whole lot of us. I often would talk politics with Julian and Frank. We clearly had this interest in what was going on politically. In fact, I was in grad school when Julian first ran for the legislature.

GI: You remember that?

LM: Of course, I remember that!

GI: Did it surprise you that he actually was willing to do it?

LM: No, no, no! Not really, because I do remember early on that Julian clearly had an interest in the political scene. I mean, he was aware of the politics of what was going on. It

turns out that clearly the background that he had – his Dad was an educator – and during the time when Julian was running for the legislature, I was a grad student at Atlanta University. I was a research assistant for Horace Mann Bond, Julian's father. I worked for him and I got so much per hour. I was in political science, but he was in the College of Education. He was Dean of Education at [Clark College] at Atlanta University. He had been, at one point, president of a couple of colleges, but then he was professor at Atlanta University. I worked some for Julian's father. And then I worked some for Julian's campaign.

GI: You did?

LM: Yeah, yeah!

GI: What did you do?

LM: Oh, you know, knock on doors, pass out flyers and that kind of stuff. Because he was running against a guy who was – we had a guy on the campus who was Dean of Men at Atlanta University [and] at one point who was also involved in politics – but I was there when Julian first ran for the legislature. I did get the things that you could do as a graduate student. On a weekend I could knock on doors, I could pass out flyers. It was not like I was making any decisions, but I was involved in the campaign. Clearly, it was an exciting period. Julian, in the tradition of the great political leaders, not only was Julian a politician, he was a pundit, too. Julian had the ability to analyze what was going on as well as get out there and do it. Of course, he had this charm, he was articulate and witty [laughs] and all of these things that you actually need to be an effective political leader.

But I recall there was a lot of excitement amongst the SNCC people when Julian decided to run, and he was able to rally people. To have the experience in the AU [Atlanta University] center and to have a number of students, from AU and Morehouse and Clark and different schools involved in the campaign also.

I just have of fond memories of Julian from the 1968 convention in Chicago. It was a novelty, right? But he becomes a national figure. His image is all over the country. Julian was just very articulate, and he was clearly very thoughtful. And he was handsome!

GI: Too much so. Not fair to everybody else.

LM: [Laughs] Yeah, yeah right! He had an appeal. He had all this stuff going for him. He was just really a natural. Julian was one of the few people, I guess as I reflect now, if you wanted to draw an audience, Julian was one of the people that could attract a number of people. He often came to Mississippi. He was clearly beloved by a whole lot of folk in SNCC.

GI: How important do you think the *Student Voice* was to the movement?

LM: Extremely important. I think the *Student Voice* connected to communities in a way that we had never, ever been connected at all. If you think about the expanse of the movement,

SNCC had projects in Georgia. SNCC, obviously, had projects in Mississippi. SNCC had projects in Arkansas. And, for a time, some stuff in Louisiana. But primarily Arkansas, Mississippi and Georgia. We could get the *Student Voice* and we could learn what was actually happening in southwest Georgia. We got the details, we got the coverage, and then the field reports that some of the SNCC field secretaries were writing.

Nobody has really done any kind of comprehensive piece on this, but if you look at some of the field reports that were written by some of the SNCC field secretaries, [that is] some of the best description of what was going on in local communities than you would ever get. There is nothing like it for that for that brief period of time. What was happening in Arkansas, what was happening in Mississippi, what was happening in Georgia . . . it's unprecedented.

No one has really devoted like a book length [study] to looking at the field reports and descriptions. But that would be one hell of a manuscript. I'm sure that some Ph.D student would probably do it . . .

GI: This is your public service announcement.

LM: [Laughs] You're right! But really, I think if you look at some of the stuff that Charles Sherrod talked about in southwest Georgia, for the brief time that Frank [Smith] was here. There is a book is called *Climbin' Jacob's Ladder*.⁴ Some descriptions that they capture in there of some of the SNCC activity is very good. And then some of the publications of the Southern Regional Council, some of their publications, occasionally had some of the field reports of the SNCC field secretaries describing the activities in different locales. The *Student Voice* picked up some of that, too, some of the communications that the *Student Voice* provided. The *Student Voice* could inform people throughout the country because it clearly was the organ for SNCC. If Fannie Lou Hamer spoke some place, Julian could capture some of the speech. You couldn't get in-depth coverage in the *Washington Post* or *New York Times*. But you got it in the *Student Voice* because you got more detail.

And there was a naming of names that were there, the highlighting of the local people. That was important. It was an important voice in the movement. It provided, I think, a way of connecting these communities in ways that movement communities had not been connected before because the NAACP didn't have anything like that in Mississippi. CORE didn't really have anything like that in Mississippi, equal to what the *Student Voice* was doing. It was an important voice within the context of movement activities in the South. Then, of course, the Friends of SNCC groups across the country had access to the *Student Voice*. It was important. Julian Bond was known in all these places because Julian was large and in charge of the *Student Voice* [laughs].

GI: Do you think the *Student Voice* helped connect the movement to national publications like the New York Times and some other bigger publications?

⁴. See Jack O'Dell and Nikhil Pal Singh, *Climbin' Jacobs Ladder: The Black Freedom Movement Writings of Jack O'Dell* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

LM: Oh, come on, man! Yes, yes, yes! You know the journalists were reading the *Student Voice*! The journalists were talking to Julian Bond. Julian clearly had contacts. Just think about the fact that he had inroads to the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Charlotte Observer*, all of the newspapers. Just think about the internal influence in SNCC of Julian Bond and Jim Forman. Aside from Miss [Ella] Baker, just think about their presence. Julian and Forman were on the job. And Ruby Doris [Smith], right?⁵ But Julian and Forman were on the job. They were there like 24/7. Forman obviously had made inroads to the foundations. Julian had inroads to the media, the TV stations and the newspapers. In a very genuine sense, they were the heart and soul of keeping SNCC as an organization functioning – and, of course, all the people who worked with Julian and Forman. But Forman was a damn powerhouse!

Jim Forman was absolutely organized. Jim Forman had the ability to connect the dots in ways that a lot of people didn't have and don't have. The inroads that they were able to make because they were really full time. But not only were they full time, they were brilliant. And that makes it real damn difference. You can be full time and not have the brilliance that those guys had and Ruby Doris and Miss Baker and all these people. I'm just simply saying that the centrality of the role that Julian and Jim Forman played and Miss Baker – if you look at the SNCC hierarchy and, of course, the visionary Bob Moses. Bob then becomes the guru – without Jim Forman and without Julian Bond doing what they're doing, the word that Bob Moses and what Miss Baker was doing because they were able to capture that in so many ways.

The contacts that Julian had with the journalists, with the *Jet* magazine people of the world, with the Johnson Publishing Company, people who were writing and thinking about the movement and the information that Julian was able to supply these people because at height of the movement the major publications had people day-to-day in Mississippi, in Georgia, in the South, in Louisiana, Julian and Forman were connecting the dots. They were helping them understand what was going on in Arkansas, in Mississippi and Alabama, etc. They were doing that. And that's an important piece. That sort of behind the scenes stuff, but it's important if you look at the holistic picture of the contributions of SNCC as an organization, those were really two strong voices within the organization.

GI: Well, why don't we finish up here by having you tell us what you think the legacy of Julian Bond was to that period of the civil rights movement?

LM: I think Julian was a voice that helped to shape the contours of the civil rights movement because Julian was the day to day narrator for SNCC. Julian words, the day to day reports of what was going on in the field. Across the country where you had SNCC

⁵. Ruby Doris Smith (Robinson) worked in the Atlanta office of SNCC from 1960 until her death from cancer at age twenty-five in 1967. As a student at Spelman College, Ms. Smith joined the Atlanta student movement and quickly became a force by those who worked closely with her. She was so widely respected that she became the first woman elected to the SNCC executive committee in 1966. Read more about her here: <https://snccdigital.org/people/ruby-doris-smith-robinson/>

projects, Julian was helping to shape the thinking of some of the people conducting the activities. If you were in Mississippi, if you were in Alabama and you needed access to the media and you needed to get a word to somebody wherever the central city of the SNCC office and the role at Julian Bond played in that process, I think it is view is monumental. Just think about Julian's voice even after the days of the movement. The telling of the stories. *Eyes on the Prize*.⁶ Again, this is the voice of not only a narrator, but somebody who was an active shaper of the history. That's a real difference. Somebody who is familiar with the stories and who is also a storyteller himself. And Julian was able to capture so many of those stories and the details those stories.

It's not like Julian Bond was reading from a piece of paper. He knew Amzie Moore. He worked with E.W. Steptoe. He worked with Vicky Gray. He worked with Annie Devine. He worked with Fannie Lou Hamer. He worked with Ella Baker. Just the idea that this man was in a position to provide and to share the movement experience with people outside of the movement and the people within the movement! Julian's thoughtfulness is something that, in my judgment, is a hallmark of what Julian Bond really was about. Julian was reflective and thoughtful and articulate. And that is a rare combination.

So often we get great orators, but they're not thoughtful. Sometimes we get great, reflective professors, but they can't teach their way out of a damn paper bag. On the other hand, if you can get a good college professor who is thoughtful and articulate and who will listen to what you have to say, that's a damn good professor. Professor Julian Bond was a professor before he became a professor. If you did some psychological analyzing of this damn thing, just think who his daddy was, right? The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree. Just think about the impact that Horace Mann Bond had not only on Julian, but all of those children. And Julian becoming a renowned professor for the country? His father had to be more than proud.

Here is a guy who dropped out of Morehouse and who becomes a damn spokesperson for the movement and [then] a professor teaching the lessons that his father had taught him. One shouldn't be surprised. Because of Julian's upbringing, because of his experience, because of his parents, he had a tremendous impact on the movement. His folk had prepared him. Here is the son of a college professor, and it's not just a regular college professor. I mean, his daddy, he very, very much involved and reflective and thoughtful. He produces – it's not unusual, right? – a son who is thoughtful and reflective and articulate. The Julian Bond legacy is that his voice, his thinking and his persona helped to frame and shape the American civil rights movement.

Then, of course, from that base he goes on to become an effective spokesperson on social and political issues, a voice that people listened to. He was a product of that environment. And thank God he was associated with SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. What more can you ask for?

⁶. *Eyes on the Prize* (1987) is a fourteen-part, Emmy Award winning series on the civil rights movement that covers the years 1954-1985. The series was produced and directed by Henry Hampton. Judy Richardson, who was interviewed for this project (03-JBOHP), served as a researchers and associate producer for the project.

