

Julian Bond Oral History Project
"The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-68"

Interview with Joyce Ladner

**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 Joyce Ladner

Joyce Ladner was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi and came of age in the civil rights movement as a young teenager when, encouraged by activists such as Medgar Evers and Vernon Dahmer, she joined an NAACP youth chapter in high school. Expelled from Jackson State University for supporting civil rights protests, Dr. Ladner transferred to Tougaloo College, just outside Jackson, and became an active participant in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). She was arrested numerous times for supporting protests and doing voter registration work. Later, Dr. Ladner helped organize the Mississippi students who attended the March on Washington in 1963. Dr. Ladner was also took part in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project.

After graduating from Tougaloo college in 1964, Dr. Ladner earned her Ph.D in sociology from Washington University in St. Louis and began a distinguished academic career, which included a term as the first woman to serve as president of Howard University.

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American University

Joyce Ladner (19-JBOHP)
July 10th, 2019
Washington, D.C

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Code: Gregg Ivers [GI] Zephaniah Jalloh [ZJ] Joyce Ladner [JL]

Today is Wednesday, July 10th, 2019, and we are on the campus of American University to conduct an oral history interview with Dr. Joyce Ladner for the Julian Bond Oral History Project. My name is Gregg Ivers. I am Professor of Government at American University. I am joined this morning by Zephaniah Jalloh, a first-year student at Howard University, who will assist me with the interview and videography of this interview. Dr. Ladner became an active participant in the civil rights movement as a young teenager in Hattiesburg, Mississippi in the late 1950s, and continued her activism in college at Jackson State and Tougaloo College. We will hear about her work during her formative years with the NAACP in youth branches in Southern Mississippi, her time in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), her perspective on the Southern civil rights movement and, finally, her impressions of Julian Bond. Dr. Ladner, thank you so much for agreeing to sit down and have this conversation with us.

JL: I'm happy to do it. Thank you.

PERSONAL AND FAMILY BACKGROUND

GI: Let's begin by having you tell us about your family background and any influences or events growing up that shaped your social consciousness.

JL: I am the third oldest of nine children. My parents had five girls and four boys. We were poor but didn't know it so to speak. I guess you've heard that expression before. We lived our entire lives within the black community. That is to say that schools and churches were segregated. The movie theaters were segregated. If we went to a movie, we had to sit in the balcony while the white kids sat down on the first floor. I mean, I hated segregation and the discrimination that came with it. But I can't say that I wanted to integrate with the white people I knew because they were not very kind people. We were happy in our all-black settings. We had our friends, our sports teams, we went to the football games, basketball

games and so on. In other words, all I'm saying is that it was segregated, but over hundreds of years black people had built their own communities and we were self-reliant in a very real sense. I never came into contact with white people unless it was at a grocery store, or at another store or some place of business. They didn't live in our community. We didn't live in theirs. But that was not the most important thing for us. Or separate schools.

For example, we were pushed to achieve. We had very strong role models. We had teachers who viewed us as their successors. In other words, they were preparing us at least to say this. We are preparing it. We're teaching you so that you can one day come back and teach or be whatever you want to be. They took up their personal interest in us to the point where they would come to our house when we were younger to talk to our parents. And teachers lived in the community as well. So that was good. I was not unhappy about anything about the way we interacted with each other or the way we lived. What I was unhappy about was the tremendous discrimination.

For example, paying my father one-third of what the other [white] workers got. He was an auto mechanic. What I was and am angry about is that the men who went off to fight World War II – I'm a product of that generation – they were promised democracy. I mean, they went to fight for democracy abroad and they came back and most of them couldn't even use the G.I. bill because it's not convenient. They would have to go away to one of the colleges wherever in order to study. There were no local schools near them. They didn't get the FHA [Federal Housing Association] loans that white men who were also in World War II got. They came back to the same segregation. They did a number of things.

One is to say they were very focused in telling us that we had to be the generation that would change things. They also joined NAACP chapters. That was mostly an underground organization because if it were known, they couldn't be hired or, if they already had a job, they could be fired. And yet, they imbued us with a strong desire to achieve and get more education than they had been able to obtain. They would tell us that you're going to be somebody one day. I remember each time I got my report card from school. We would be walking home. The lady up the street would stop us and say, "Little girls come here! Let me see your report cards!" And she gave me a dime for each "A" I made.

This particular neighbor always said to the people who were around her that these little girls are going to be somebody when they grow up. And I always thought about them as I was achieving, I always thought about her and her sister and the other people on our street who had a sense of the possibilities of not only myself, of me, but also for the other kids who were in school. They encouraged us tremendously. They had not been able to. They didn't have the opportunities we had, even though ours were limited. They were significant compared to those of the generation before us.

So that's how I grew up. I grew up with a strong sense of who I was, a strong sense of self. My mother was the fifth oldest of eleven children and her father was the only African-American to serve on a grand jury. It's the turn of the century in the county where they lived. He was highly regarded in this community and he taught his children that they were going to be somebody when they grew up and they didn't have to kowtow to anyone. They

passed that on to us. Each generation before them passed it on, so we got the message. All my cousins can repeat the same phrases. And this was unusual.

GI: Is this the early 1950s in terms of your consciousness forming?

JL: Right, right. I mean, I had a strong sense of injustices from the time I was quite young. There was right and wrong. And if I saw anyone being mistreated, it just broke my little heart. But as I grew older and came to understand more about systematic injustices that were carried out against people because of their dark skin color, then I slowly formed a consciousness. I can remember when I started wanting to fight against it. It was probably Emmett Till, even before Emmett Till was murdered.

When he was murdered, I think, I was going on twelve years old and he was fourteen. I'd never been to the Delta of Mississippi where he was murdered but I'd heard about it. It was always told to us terms of where black people live almost in slavery because they live on plantations and they cannot own their own homes. They cannot do this, they cannot do that. But when Emmett Till was reported missing, even as a kid, you had the sense that he wouldn't be alive when he was found, if he was found. I think that that was my clarion call to action because I vowed that one day when I was eleven, twelve year old, I said one day when I get big, "big" meaning when I grow up, I'm going to make sure that this doesn't happen again. I don't know quite how at that time. But it was just a strong sense that it could have been me because I was his same age, peer group.

As children, we were coming into our own, kind of developing some sort of semi-independence as young people. All of a sudden here's this boy who was lynched in the same manner that an adult would have been lynched. Not that either of the lynchings should have carried on but they spared no mercy because he was a child. That was also shocking that they could murder a child that way. You see, I was a reader, a newspaper reader, even at that age. My sister [Dorie] and I used to go to the corner store every day at four-thirty. That's when the newspapers came out. And it cost a nickel or a dime. And we read you know read it from cover to cover. During the time they were searching for him, all the old people, the adults were talking about that boy up in the Delta was taken by these white men and they took him off and killed them. They predicted that he was dead long before, I won't say long before, but before his body was found.

I was terrified that it could happen to me, that it could happen to my brother, who was younger than me, that it could happen to my father. And just really angry as well. When I saw the cover of *Jet* magazine that showed his decomposed body on the cover, I was horrified but I was also determined that one day I'm going to get even with people who do these kinds of things.

And the funny thing is that years later, when I talked to people who had also joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee or SNCC, they said that the picture of Emmett Till's body on the cover of *Jet* magazine left a profound impression on them as well and that they set out to one day change things or they said they were going to change things. The first time I went to the Museum of African American History and Culture here in

Washington [D.C], there is one room that is reserved for his small casket. And there's a bench in front of it. In the old Negro churches, black churches, it was called the "mourning bench." I was so overcome that I just broke down and cried and sat on that bench because it took me back, transposed me in time to when I was almost twelve and saw that picture.

It's remarkable that it still has that kind of impact. If you go to the museum, you'll see a line of people. It's the only part of the museum where you'll see a lot of people waiting to go through to observe it. Children at our age, we didn't know children who had died, any children who had been killed. You just didn't do things to children. Sure, they attacked your father and they might tell you, "Go on boy! Now get on away from here, boy, or you going to get in trouble!" A sheriff would hit your father over the head for some minor infraction, even if it wasn't an infraction. But the kids were left to be. That was the beginning of my consciousness.

ZJ: How did the murder of Emmett Till impact your life as an adult?

JL: Emmett Till was never far from my mind and has never been that far from my mind. I told his mother, Mrs. Mamie Till Mobley, that, when I met her at a conference in the 1980s in Atlanta that honored women in a civil rights movement, I told her about being a young kid in Mississippi at the time, what I just described. I asked her, "Why did you allow them to take a picture of him without the embalmer, the mortician, fixing his face. They could have done some cosmetic work. She said, "I wanted the world to see what they had done to my baby." And by doing so she caused me – that act alone caused us to continually think about Emmett Till.

We're planning a conference [for the 60th SNCC anniversary] next year and one of the panel discussions we're going to have is from Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin because Trayvon Martin represents to your generation what Emmett Till was to mine. I have always thought about how would keep that from happening again, what happened to him from happening again. I've used it as a motivation to fight for justice, to fight against poverty, to fight against the incarceration of black people and in particular the fight against the violence that takes place where black men and boys – and black girls and women – are exploited or mistreated or disregarded. Emmett Till remains a powerful symbol in my mind.

INFLUENCES AND INSPIRATION

JL: In high school I was very active in every organization there was. I was the "good citizen." In college I received an award from one of the male fraternities, the "Citizen of the Year Award." I was very, very engaged in my community, engaged at church, engaged particularly in high school. My senior year for example I was state-wide president of the Try-Hi-Y, which is a black organization. The black kids' organization was called the Try-Hi-Y. The white organization was the Y Teens. They were organized under the auspices of the YMCA. We had a school chapter, district chapters and state-wide chapters. I was elected state-wide president.

I was highly influenced by a number of people as I was growing up. One was a teacher, Mrs. Zola Jackson, who was my first teacher. I went to school when I was three and a half and she taught me to read. Later, she also was given hundred dollars a year to buy books for the school library. The library consisted of a bookshelf in her classroom. I won't go into how the fact that we also had the hand-me-down books from the white schools from the white kids. After several years of using the books, then we got the books. You could see their names written in the books. All of that reinforced my sense early on that there was so much injustice that we would have no choice but to fight against it at some point. I was also influenced by a family friend who supplied us with his copies of the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines. He subscribed to them. After he read them, he gave them to my sister Dorie and to me, and so we were quite aware of what was going on outside Mississippi.

I should mention here that the press was censored in Mississippi. There was never any news in the *Hattiesburg American* newspaper about anything positive happening to black people or in the news about what was going on in the outside world. The purpose was to keep all of us ignorant in a way. White people and black people. We didn't get a TV station in Harrisburg until about 1957 or '58. We got fifteen [minutes] of national news with NBC. NBC had the Chet Huntley-David Brinkley news, and it was fifteen minutes, so that's the only time we heard about what was going on in the larger society, the larger world. My mother's closest friend was a woman named Eileen Beard. She was the sister of the civil rights martyr who was murdered, Vernon Dahmer.¹ She asked my mother if she could take my sister and me, Dorie and me, to Jackson, Mississippi, to the statewide NAACP meetings.

My mother trusted her enough to let us go. We were fourteen . . . maybe in 1957 or so. I remember being young, not a full adolescent at all. I couldn't believe that all these people here believed in "Negro rights," as we called them. It was just the most remarkable thing. My eyes were widened. The fact that there was kind of an underground, a group of people throughout the state who wanted to overturn segregation and wanted to abolish it. I met kids my age who were also in NAACP youth chapters in other cities. We eventually, with Mr. Dahmer and Clyde Kennard, organized an NAACP youth chapter for us in Hattiesburg.

I cannot overstate the fact that we had mentors. I tell young people today that they can't wait until someone seeks them out to mentor them. They have to find people, like-minded people, if you've got a sense that things aren't right. You can bet there are adults around who feel the same way and they can help you. They can guide you. When we were young. We weren't eighteen year-olds by any means. I remember the night our NAACP youth chapter was organized. Medgar Evers drove down from Jackson. It was at True Light Baptist church, I believe. I think it was True Light. Medgar Evers was there. Dr. [B.E.] Murph

¹. Vernon Dahmer was a legendary civil rights activist and organizer from Hattiesburg, Mississippi who served as the director of the NAACP chapter there. He was among the very first people from the region to encourage voter registration. He died on January 10th, 1966, after Ku Klux Klansmen set fire to his home. Mr. Dahmer was able to get his young children and wife out of the house but suffered serious burns from the waist down and later died of smoke inhalation.

from Laurel.² Laurel was a city of thirty miles away. He came with a bus load of young people our age who were in the Laurel NAACP youth chapter, so it was just remarkable, just fun. And it was also illegal! I loved it [laughs].

So those are just some of the influences, early influences on us. We used to ride in that car up to Jackson with Vernon Dahmer, Eileen and Kenneth Beard, her husband. Clyde Kennard, who also died at the hands of white people who incarcerated him for allegedly stealing chicken feed and he didn't [do it]. He went to Parchman Penitentiary for it. He got very ill with colon cancer and would have died in prison had we not organized a campaign to ask the governor to release him on medical grounds. The government didn't want him to die in the custody of the state, so he was released. I remember going home – when he got out of prison – I was in college by then. I went home to Hattiesburg to see him. It was amazing that he said he had no bitterness toward anyone. He was kind of supernatural in a way. I guess what I'm saying is that he was the most extraordinary person that you could meet.

ENTERING JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

GI: Once you get to Jackson State, how do you take the next step in your activism?

JL: My sister and I went to Jackson State in the fall of 1960. The first thing that I experienced was this tremendous sense of joy of being pretty independent and living independently in my life. We had curfews but I don't have someone like my mother saying, "You can't do this, and you can't do that," even though we still had to be in the dorm when it turned dark at night. I just felt empowered as a young woman to be outside my parents' home. We continued our friendship with Medgar Evers. We had relatives living in Jackson who were active in the NAACP and they came on campus and got us and took us to the NAACP meetings near the campus. We also renewed our friendship with Medgar Evers who we called Mr. Evers. We used to go to his office to talk to him about our interest in civil rights and so on. And he was you know he's always very, very encouraging. He would tell us news about where he traveled recently because he drove throughout Mississippi, day and night, on those dark, lonely two-lane highways, going from one city to another. He was the remains in my mind, he and Bob Moses, who led the Mississippi movement, were the two bravest people I ever knew.

However they dealt with their fear, it never crippled them at all and never interfered with their work. I remember once Bob told me that. I asked him, how did you overcome his fear? He said you had to come to terms with the fact that you might one day, be killed. If you come to terms with it, then you proceed and then go on to do your work because you can't allow to interfere. But we often went to Medgar's office to see him and talk to him about civil rights. One day we were there we learned from him that there would be the first Mississippi sit in. We asked him if we could join, and he said, "Yes, you can."

². Dr. B.E. Murph was a prominent dentist and civil rights activist in Laurel, Mississippi, who organized the first NAACP youth chapter in that city. His home was repeatedly shot up and attacked because of his work with the NAACP and other civil rights causes.

We wanted it to be in the sit ins. And he later said, "No, now that I think about it, you can't do that because I would never know what to say to your mother when you get arrested." One time Medgar came on campus and he said, "I was in Hattiesburg yesterday and I met your mother." I said, "You met my mother?" And he said, "Yes, I was in a grocery store and I introduced myself to this nice lady there, and she said, 'Oh, you're from Jackson. I have children at Jackson State. I have two girls there.' She said, 'Can you take this money to them?'" It was whatever she was using, whatever she had leftover, after she bought some food to cook. He brought it on campus. It wasn't a lot of money, but I was just so shocked and so glad that my mother had met Medgar Evers.

She didn't really know who he was. She wasn't active in the movement or anything, but he felt a responsibility after he met her. He said, "What happens when you get arrested? I don't want to have to call your mother and tell her, that she'll be angry with me about it." He also said that because we were enrolled in the state college instead of a private school we'd be expelled. But he did encourage us to rally behind the students, [the] Tougaloo college students, after they sat in. And we did, helping to organize with other students. We organized a campus protest. Believe it or not the only acceptable protest we could think of was a prayer meeting because in the South you had prayer before and after every event. You still do and that still goes on!

Anyway, it all ended horribly because the president of the college broke up the prayer meeting in front of the library that night. He knocked my roommate down to the ground, and he brought the police on the campus to force us to go into our dorms. The next day we marched down to the courthouse for the arraignment of the Tougaloo college students who had sat in the public library and all of a sudden, we got to the corner, the intersection of Rose Street and Pearl Street. The police had set up a roadblock. Then they attacked us, starting shooting tear gas and they had police dogs. My God, the dogs were one thing that was just terrifying. I mean, I had this subliminal feeling like this is what slaves felt like when they were chased by bloodhounds. They even brought the dogs from another city, from Vicksburg, just for the purpose of breaking up this demonstration. They didn't care if the dogs beat us or whatever. And I heard the shooting sounds and I thought it was, I said, "Oh, Lord, they're trying to kill us."

Actually, it was tear gas because it made pop sounds like gun fire. They started chasing us, so we scattered. I eventually got back to the campus, but it was a very harrowing experience. That sealed my fate because when we came back from spring break – the president had called an early spring break – we learned that he had expelled my roommate. Actually, the night he knocked my roommate to the ground he said to her that she would be expelled. It was horrible. You could not imagine today living through those times. Now here's a young student, seventeen years-old, never done anything wrong except stand there to pray a prayer for the safety of the students at a college nearby who were in jail that in Mississippi's first sit, Mississippi being the last state in the union to have sit in protests because it was so dangerous. And yet she was being told that she had to leave by daybreak. Be off campus, be out of the dorm.

I was so angry and so upset. There were two of us who were roommates – there were three in the room – and we kept telling her, "You didn't do anything wrong. You shouldn't have to leave campus. They wronged you. He knocked you down." She called her parents. They drove all the way from the coast of Mississippi. It was Ocean Springs, which is far down the coast, going towards New Orleans, and drove through the night. They tried to see the president of the college the next day. He refused even to meet with them. They had no choice but to take her home. I have not been able to find out where she is over these many years. I don't know what happened to her. But that was such a horrible, horrible thing to experience.

That would be the first of many horrible things that I would experience. Later, in 1963, two years later, Medgar Evers was murdered, and that was horrible, just horrible. Then three years later when Vernon Dahmer – Mr. Dahmer, who had driven us to these NAACP meetings – was murdered. I will never forget when my mother called me early one morning. I was in graduate school by then. Six o'clock in the morning, because I remember looking at the clock when I heard the phone ring. If someone called you late at night or early in morning it was always something bad. She said, "I wanted to let you know that Mr. Dahmer was shot, I mean, was in a hospital. The Ku Klux Klan firebombed his house and he was trying to get out and he got burned and inhaled smoke." She called later that afternoon to say he died.

The bottom of my world dropped out. As I was thinking again, by 1966, things had gotten better. The reason he was murdered was because he announced on the radio that anyone who wanted to register to vote and could not afford to pay the poll tax, he would pay it for them. The leader of the Ku Klux Klan, in a town nearby not far from where he lived, heard that that announcement. He and other Klansmen came to Mr. Dahmer's house. They did two things. They torched the house to burn it down. At the same time, they were shooting into the house. He got his wife and two young kids out through the window, the back window. He kept shooting at them trying to stave them off long enough for his wife to drive his children away. But he inhaled too much smoke and he suffered burns. That was horrible, horrible. That death was so close to me, as was Medgar Evers.

I've thought a lot recently, in my older age, about how these deaths that we experienced when we were young. The violent death of these civil rights activists that came when we were so young. In other ways you expect to be living a carefree existence, not have a lot of troubles, in college enjoying yourself, in high school, or wherever. The thing about racial segregation and the violent side of it was that you were always a victim, a potential victim. You are one step away from being shot down or chased by the Ku Klux Klan, or your car burned, or attacked physically or harassed by telephone. And there was no sanctuary, there was no safe place to be. I've been in cars driven by civil rights workers, by guys who had to outrun a local police officer. Because you couldn't stop. If you stopped, they could kill you. What you tried to do was to just get away. They always had the girls like us sit in the backseat of the car because if a bullet came, they wanted to be the first to take the bullet for us.

That's what one of the things that bothered me most about attacks that some white women made against Stokely Carmichael and other men in the movement. Stokely once made a – he could be very funny at times – one day there was a discussion about what is the role of women in the movement and he quipped, "The role of women in the movement is prone." That is, lying down. And he was joking, because the discussion went on and after the quip was over, they had a serious discussion about what should women be doing in the movement. But people who didn't understand the context didn't understand, didn't know Stokely, didn't know the other parties involved. Some of the feminists used that to carry out their narrative that men oppressed women in the movement. Or the fact that white women were not allowed to go out in the community to knock on doors, to canvass for registered voters or whatever. That women were being oppressed.

You see, I came at that from a completely different direction. The guys would tell us you've got to sit in the backseat and get down, hold your head down meant they didn't want us to take the bullet. They didn't want us to get shot. First, we regarded them more like brothers than anything else. So, it really bothered me and hurt me over time, over the years when people misunderstood the intent of some of our actions. I'm covering some of this in the memoir I'm writing. What is the proper interpretation of things you see? Things that you hear about. What is the proper context? If you don't understand the context from the perspective of those who lived through it, then you could really come up very short and make some very wrong assumptions about events historical events that occurred.

The reason white women were not allowed to go out into some black communities and knock on doors and try to get people to register to vote was because they were lightning rods for white racists. There's nothing they hated more day to day than knowing that they're white women who were living with black people during Mississippi Freedom Summer. They were living in black communities. Because of the Deep South and during that era, white women historically were, among these people, these vile racists by women were considered by them to be the epitome of racial purity and to be placed on a pedestal. The idea that these white women lived among black people, if they saw them walking around down the street with a black guy in the movement, for example, and they are both knocking on doors or organizing a mass meeting at a church or they were living in a Freedom House where a lot of civil rights workers would live in this house independently, they would get very, very angry. It wasn't about oppressing anyone but staying alive, about not being killed. So anyway, that's my spiel on that. I always get upset when I think about this.

As a retired professor, I will continue to enlighten people on the true meaning of some of the actions that were taken fifty, sixty years ago.

TRANSFERRING TO TOUGALOO COLLEGE

GI: Can we talk about Tougaloo College a little bit?

JL: Let's go back to Jackson State first. After Eunice [Dr. Ladner's roommate] was expelled, the president's student government was also expelled after that the demonstration at Jackson State. Dorie and I were called in to the Dean of Students office. His name was Oscar

Rogers. He was a Tougaloo college grad. He called us in, and he told us that you want to inform us that we were being expelled. We were allowed to finish the school year since we had just a month left. But we couldn't come back and naturally we want to know why. And he said, "I know that you were involved in organizing this protest. I also know that you've been slipping off campus and going up to Medgar Evers's office."

We were some brash and abrasive seventeen and eighteen-year-old young people. One of us said, "We're glad we're being expelled. I hate this school and others of us said, "You're stricter than mother. I hate Jackson State." One of us said, "We're going to transfer to Tougaloo College." I had no idea how we were going to get into Tougaloo or who is going to pay for it because it cost twice as much to go to Tougaloo as a private liberal arts college than it did to go to Jackson State. We were not to be outdone because we saw this dean as a symbol. We called him an Uncle Tom. We saw him as a symbol of holding black people back. I've wondered forever how he found out that we were going to Medgar's office. The best I can come up with is that the office was bugged. I'm sure Medgar's office was bugged anyway and that his phone was tapped. Somehow, the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, which was the secret police, that they fed this information back to the college about going in and out of that office.³

I felt quite liberated. I felt just as young people use the word "agency" now, I felt I was all in my agency [laughs]. I had come of age. Best of all we could tell him off. The two of us together, one of us separately, would not have been the same people. But it's like twins and when twins get together, they talk and finish each other's sentences and they're right in tune. Dorie and I are the same way. I was like fifteen or sixteen months younger than she, and we went toe to toe, head to head with him. It was like we often feed off each other. Dorie was much more outspoken than I was. She was the big sister and I was agreeing with it – "yes, yes, yes [laughs]." She always took the lead. One of the faculty members – this is Aurelia Young, who was the wife of one the four black lawyers in the state, Jack Young. She taught music at Jackson State. She drove us out to Tougaloo to apply to the college and we got in.

It was the best decision, that unintended consequence, that could have happened to us because that's when I began to just grow and completely come into my own because Tougaloo was a lot like many other private HBCUs that had a long, long history of fostering independence. Since it received no state funds, it was an independent institution, and police could not come onto campus at all. The racists couldn't drive through the campus in

³. The Mississippi Sovereignty Commission was a state-funded agency that operated from 1956-1977 that actively spied on citizens thought to pose a danger to white supremacy and racial segregation. The Commission also maintained a secret police force and worked in tandem with state domestic terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. After a series of lawsuits by the American Civil Liberties Union and investigative reporting by *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* reporter Jerry Mitchell, the files were unsealed in 1998. For more, see Paul Hendrickson, *Sons of Mississippi* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003) and Jenny Irons, *Reconstituting Whiteness: the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010).

their pickup trucks and rebel flags or burn fiery crosses. I think they did burn a cross in front of the president's house. But there were also guards on the campus and sometimes the male students would bring their guns out and patrol the campus at night. It was a completely different place. I felt that I had died and gone to heaven when I went to that school because I had never in my life experienced the kind of sense of freedom, to be encouraged to express, to inquire. It was a strong sense of intellectual inquiry.

There were no questions that were off limits within the classroom, whereas at Jackson State you have to be careful what you said. You couldn't openly discuss civil rights in a classroom because the professor who would allow such a discussion would be called in and maybe fired. I cannot express how horrible it felt to be so oppressed that you couldn't even express what was on your mind freely. It was terrible. When all the students came out of the dorms that night for the protest, I was shocked! There was no way to gauge who else felt the way you felt since you couldn't talk about it openly. There were hundreds of students out there that night, maybe four or five hundred students, I'm not sure. It's noted in one book that it was twelve hundred. That's not true because a lot of students lived off campus. It was so gratifying to see that other people felt the way I did, and I felt the way a lot of other people did, so going to Tougaloo was a blessing. First of all, it was a liberal arts college and we studied religion, philosophy, logic. I got a broad education. It was not confined to education to being trained to become an elementary school teacher. Not that there's anything wrong with that at all. I remember one faculty member took us students to the Ethical Culture Society in Jackson. That's not quite a religion [laughs].

GI: Pretty subversive for Jackson to have something like that . . .

JL: Yes [laughs]. I went with the professors to the Unitarian Church. It was remarkable, a remarkable education. Later on, in the throes of the civil rights movement, our professors would go to jail in the protests as well. I went to jail for a time for trying to integrate a white church. There's this big, imposing Galloway Methodist Church in downtown Jackson and we students had a campaign, a civil rights campaign, to try to integrate the churches because we felt that "in God's house" how could they turn you away and say that you don't have a right to worship? Because if they truly believe in God, how can you decide that you can worship, and other people cannot. Would God segregate people according to their race? Actually, we were trying to force the moral questions, pose the moral questions to these church members and to the ministers and so on. I was invited to the church by one of the men of one of our faculty members, John Gardner, who taught math and physics. He was a member of that church. I went with him. We went through the side door.

Let me back up a minute. As soon as we left campus the police were sitting outside the gates of the campus and they would follow us whenever we left the campus to see where we were going what kinds of civil rights work we were going to get involved in so they could arrest us or whatever. Mr. Gardner and I were driving out of the campus, and as soon as we turned right to go to Jackson, the police were sitting right there behind us and followed us all the way into the church. Mr. Gardner and I got inside the church. I was told you could not come in. You're not free to worship here. And then I said I'm simply here to worship or something like that. I have copious notes of a lot of these events. I said

something to the effect that I'm here only to worship. And then it was one of the trustees or deacons who said, "If you do not leave, we will have no choice but to have you arrested." The police were standing right there.⁴

I wouldn't leave, and then they took me to jail. In that jail cell that day, a female jail cell, there were black female students from Tougaloo who had gone to other churches. We had a cell full of Tougaloo women. We stayed in jail a long time. It was less than a week but close to it. We didn't get bailed out immediately.

We had fun in jail too. It was. People always laugh when I say this because they weren't about to do anything really harmful to us because everybody knew that these Tougaloo women students who were in jail, and they knew would not be looked on unkindly if we were raped or beaten up or whatever. I didn't like the food. For each meal we had corn bread and rice and served for breakfast. Lunch time we had beans and some cornbread. For Dinner we had beans and cornbread. My stomach was just not hearing about eating these beans all the time. I stopped eating. The chief of police came to the jail cell one night and he said, "I understand that you're sick. I'll take you to the hospital." I said, "No, I'm not sick." He said, "Well you're not eating." I said, "I just don't like the food." I wasn't on a hunger strike or anything, but he got really, really worried. He said, "I will take you and they can check you out to see if you're okay." I prevailed upon him that I was quite okay. I just didn't like the food.

But that week we were in jail we met some local women who would get locked up on weekends for all kinds of disturbances and so on. But they actually protected us. They were very kind. I mean, they had been in jail before, so they knew what happens and so on. They made sure that we were okay and so on. One of the funny things that happened, now when I look back on it, was that had all been looking forward to U.N. Ambassador Ralph Bunche, who was ambassador for refugees at the United Nations. My mentor, Dr. Ernest Berinski, had invited Bunche to speak at the college on United Nations Day. We were all eagerly awaiting and planning to attend his lecture. And we were in jail. We sent a note to one of the faculty [members] and asked them if, when they went to get Ralph Bunche from the airport, they could stop by the jail for us to meet him. I didn't realize until sometime later that he had actually come by the jail, but it wasn't visiting day, which was Wednesday afternoon. We didn't see him.

But I'll never forget that. Ralph Bunche stopped at the Jackson Hinds County Jail to see these incarcerated college students and they wouldn't even make an exception. They made exceptions for no one. My boyfriend came on a day other than Wednesday to see me and they wouldn't let him see me either. As you get older, I think back on these things, we didn't consider ourselves extraordinary in any way. We were very ordinary. We were like other students. We had other lives. I mean, civil rights was part of it, but we were full-time

⁴. For a comprehensive description of the Jackson church protests, see Carter Dalton Lyon: *Sanctuaries of Segregation: The Story of the Jackson Church Visit Campaign* (Oxford, Miss.: University of Mississippi Press, 2017).

students as well. I always had one foot in activism and another in the academy. I wouldn't have been a whole person or a happy person if I didn't have both. When I matured into my profession, I was a scholar-activist because I like still to be called, to be referred to because I was also very, very devoted to my studying and to achieving. When I graduated college in 1964, I was twenty years old and I went directly to graduate school at Washington University in St. Louis. I finished four years later in '68 and I was twenty-four. I was still very young, and I was so driven. Just compulsion! I was just very, very driven and whatever I did I was "Gung Ho" all the way!

JOINING SNCC

GI: When did you get involved with SNCC?

JL: I became involved in SNCC when I went to Tougaloo, the fall of '61. I met some of the Freedom Riders who had gotten out of Mississippi, Parchman Penitentiary and they decided to stay on in Mississippi to organize. I met Diane Nash, who was a student at Fisk and led the Nashville movement. I met Jim Bevel, who was her husband. I met Paul and Katherine [Burks]-Brooks. They were students at Tennessee State. I know she was at Tennessee State and he was a minister, too, like Bevel was. He may have been at the American Baptist College in Nashville. They lived in a house on Rose Street near where we were arrested, near where the cops broke up the demonstration with the dogs. We used to go, Dorie and Jimmy Travis, Lawrence Guyot, maybe some other students as well, there were a handful of us who went over to what was called the Freedom House where they lived, on Saturday afternoons.

We'd go out to canvass and to register voters. That was the house where people who are passing through Jackson often stay. They stopped there and we met other civil rights workers who were coming to Mississippi at the time. I can say that Diane became the first SNCC field secretary. I met Bob Moses, who had been down in McComb, earlier that summer working in the movement. Marion Barry had been down in McComb. Chuck McDew, who became the chairman of SNCC, was there as well. Others, including Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes and Brenda Travis, who were from McComb, had grown up there. They became very prominent in the movement.

I was immediately drawn to the civil rights movement, the nascent movement that was developing. I had the freedom to go to the office on Lynch Street, up the street from Jackson State. Just before the academic year ended before our freshman year ended, we were at Medgar Evers' office.

At one of those visits at Medgar's office, he introduced us to a young man whose name was Tom Gaither. He said, "I want you to meet someone, Tom Gaither, and he's come to Mississippi to help us get our freedom." That's all he said about him. He didn't tell us how the freedom was going to be obtained or whatever, but in time we got to know Tom. He had an office on Lynch Street, and he was actually doing the advance work for the Freedom

Rides that were going to occur later that summer.⁵ We got to know him and learn more about the real movement that was coming to Mississippi. He said that spring, May or June, that young people would be riding buses, first from Washington, down through the South, to test all of the public facilities and the bus stations.

What that meant was that in the Deep South they had separate facilities bathrooms and waiting rooms, too, for whites and for blacks. If you were black you couldn't go into the white waiting room. Vice versa – the whites couldn't go into the black [facilities]. We really wished we could have been Freedom Riders. I did. Dorie says she didn't want to, but we had to go to Chicago that summer to work. We worked at the Spiegel mail order house to make money for college and were staying with an uncle and aunt.

We asked them if we could – I asked them – if we could join the Freedom Rides. I got my Daddy on the phone and talked to him about it and they decided it was too dangerous. They respected our desire to fight for our rights. But they thought we could get hurt. I learned later that I was too young because I was seventeen and you had to be older in order to join the Freedom Rides. But my radicalization came with joining SNCC. In the fall of '61 when we got back to college and went to Tougaloo, it was a time of acceleration of the movement in Mississippi. Different people were coming to the state. One guy had dropped out of Oberlin College and he came and established a newspaper called the *Mississippi Free Press*. In fact, I saw him and his wife when I went to the opening of the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum. It was amazing to see him again after all those years.

We started out hanging out at that office, the civil rights office, and as we met more people, like-minded people and started doing voter registration work and so on. It was just a matter of the many ideas and desires to see a change in Mississippi began to take form. That was also the time when Diane Nash and some of the others who stayed on in Mississippi decided they wanted to continue to fight direct action, like testing segregated facilities and so on. Then another group of people out of McComb were more interested in voter registration because, as a native Mississippian, I identified strongly with the voter registration. First, the logic of it was that if you have the vote, you're empowered to remove people from office who are keeping you in bondage. You can vote the sheriff out of office, or the mayor or whatever. Eventually, the group that held sway were those who were more politically active in voter registration. But it was in these early years that I met SNCC people. I think I met Julian Bond at the SNCC office in Atlanta in '62.

MEETING JULIAN BOND

GI: Why don't we talk about that? When was the first time you met Julian Bond? Had you heard of him before you met him?

⁵. A Great Falls, South Carolina native, Tom Gaither served as a field secretary for SNCC shortly after it organized in 1960, then went to Mississippi to serve as the coordinator of the Freedom Rides organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1961. He remained in Mississippi for the next few years working with the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) on voter registration and other matters through 1964.

I met Julian at the same time I met other [people], Ruby Doris Smith, for example, who was the real engine behind SNCC in the Atlanta office. She kept things moving, she and Julian and others that had worked with the Atlanta student movement. I was impressed by all of them. Julian was cool, laid back [laughs], as he typically was over time. He was the person who did the communication. I was going to bring some of the files I had early on, including a copy of a letter I sent to Julian, because he had asked me if we could find out whether it would be possible to have a SNCC conference at Tougaloo and I answered him. I had some early copies of field communications that were sent out of his office. He was in charge of communications, and at that stage it was a telephone and some phone numbers of supporters in the North who could raise bail money for us to get people out of jail in the South. It was someone who could contact Friends of SNCC groups on campuses to either host SNCC people on the campus or to raise funds. Campus recruitment didn't come along until later. But he was just like us.⁶

Julian and Jim Foreman, who was the executive secretary of SNCC [and] Ruby Doris [Smith] Robinson were the three people I knew the best. And, of course, William Porter, who ran the mailroom and died last year. Those are some of the people I remember most as being the kind of engine of the Atlanta SNCC office. That was our national office, so we went there to for conferences. It was in '62 when I went to Atlanta that I met [Julian]. Easygoing. We used the term "cool" a lot back then. He was cool. Unflappable. I mean, he had a beautiful voice.

GI: So he had the voice even at twenty-three and twenty-four years old that he had later in his life?

JL: Oh, yeah. He had the voice that was developing. It's wasn't as strong and heavy and hoarse. Not as strong as it became over the later years, but he had the voice. He was friendly. He's the same person he was later in life. Easygoing, very easygoing. Smart as hell! I'm sorry [smiles]. Extremely bright.

GI: Smart as hell is fine.

JL: Then smart as hell. We counted on him to keep us informed for those of us who were in other parts of the South. He was the one who sent out the press releases or reports about roundups, about what was happening, so he was clearly a central player and very much, as director of communications, in a very critical role.

JULIAN BOND AS COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR OF SNCC

GI: How important was the communications office in the day-to-day operation of SNCC, in the day-to-day lives of people who were going out in the field?

⁶. The Friends of SNCC were campus groups at colleges and universities outside the South that provided support for SNCC by raising funds, inviting speakers to campus to brief students and faculty on civil rights work, publicizing the difficulties, arrests and violence that SNCC staffers, particularly in the field, experienced on a regular basis.

JL: It was critical! The communications office was the link between us and the outside world. You can do all the voter registration work, protests or organizing mass meetings in churches all you want. You could do that forever. But if that was not communicated to the broader world, they didn't know we existed. You see, we had no other way in which to communicate this information on a day-to-day basis. We had to get the information out ourselves. Remember, reporters didn't start covering the movement in Mississippi until '63. Later in '63.

GI: White reporters, I assume.

JL: Yes, white reporters, I should say. The *New York Times*, *Newsweek* magazine were among the two that I remember. I remember Dan Rather coming down in '63. We didn't get large scale coverage until Freedom Summer, when the sons and daughters of prominent white people came to volunteer in Freedom Summer. One of the reasons Freedom Summer was organized was very clearly because we reasoned we could be arrested forever, but if the sons and daughters of the rich and powerful and prominent are arrested, that news would get out in a lot of ways. One is that the media would follow. That is to say, if we had a summer project where hundreds of white students were recruited to volunteer in Mississippi for that summer that the media would follow them, whereas with us they didn't.

We felt also that their parents would contact members of Congress. Mind you, I knew who the congressman was who represented Hattiesburg. But I wouldn't call him my congressman. I would never call his office to intercede with anything because they were racist. They would call you "nigger." They were horrible people. They represented white people and not us. The communications office got the information out by contacting, as I said, our key supporters outside, frequently or most of the time by asking them to call the local paper and tell them what's happening. Have them call the local paper and have them call the sheriff in Greenwood, Mississippi, Leflore County, call the local paper and have them inquire, tell them you're writing a story so you can inquire about some arrests in Hattiesburg, in Jackson or Greenville or wherever. Call Friends of SNCC campus groups around the country and have them make inquiries by calling the police office to say that they are inquiring about some arrest. Often times, they wouldn't even tell us whether they'd arrested someone, but we knew they had. They wouldn't confirm it.

We felt that if there was anyone else who could make those calls and make those people aware that they were being watched, that that they were being held accountable, even if it was by people far away, that it would help. The Friends of SNCC campus groups, they were also a good source of fundraising as well. SNCC workers, like the Freedom Singers, the SNCC Freedom Singers, performed on campuses in the North and raised money. At first, Julian was the lone person running the communications shop, then Dottie Zellner started working with him.⁷ The tougher times got, the more arrests, beatings, shootings that occurred, the more critical the communications office was.

⁷. Dorothy Zellner was interviewed for this project (JBOHP-06).

GI: What do you think contributed to the sense of legitimacy that he was able to develop with the white media and the federal government?

JL: Well, it was his persona. He was educated. He engendered trust. He was not loud and pushy. And, as I said, cool. That was critical because being or appearing unflappable outwardly – he wasn't unflappable inwardly at all – but outwardly was so important because he could call Natchez [Mississippi] and ask the police if they arrested so-and-so.⁸ He didn't speak slowly like typical Southerners do [laughs].

THE IMPORTANCE OF JULIAN BOND'S FAMILY BACKGROUND

GI: How important do you think his family background was?

JL: I think it shaped who he was. His father and mother were what I call "race men and women." There's a term from back then, "he's a race man." Dr. Bond was a race man. Mrs. Bond was a race woman. That is to say, they advocated for the rights of African Americans. His parents were also educators. Dr. Bond was president of Lincoln University. There is a photograph that I think is really incredible of Dr. Bond, E. Franklin Frazier, the sociologist, W.E.B. DuBois, those people. They had come to Lincoln University I guess to speak for some event. Then there's a picture of little Julian and Jane Bond. They're sitting there. I mean, it's so amazing because here is Dr. Bond and these leading scholars of their generation. These little kids, they're being influenced by these people because of the relationship their parents had with these prominent black thinkers.

There's another photograph taken of [Alfred] Einstein, who is noted to have said that he did like to speak on campuses. Einstein made a visit to Lincoln University and Julian is in that photograph as well. I don't know if I can even imagine any other person I know who had the heft, whose family could create an environment in which their child could interact with Einstein in their own home. That was just truly, truly remarkable. But Julian was the child of educated people. Julian's father had brothers and sisters, but his brothers became very prominent as well. There's a book published a long time ago, I think I may still have it, called *The Bonds*, and it's about that larger Bond family. I knew Julian's first cousin, Dr. Leslie Bond in St. Louis. He was a physician. In fact, I saw one Leslie's children, his son, at Julian's memorial service.

Julian was very self-assured, too. I think that came from being brought up in a family that taught him to have very strong self-esteem and to have a strong sense of who he was and to be empowered. Also, to view himself as someone who was not a victim or downtrodden. I think he was also taught to fight for the rights of others. Because his parents were active in the struggle for civil rights and I think he had to have been taught that, "But for the grace of God go I." He could have been downtrodden. He could have grown up under different circumstances. Also, he grew up in segregation. No matter how prominent his family was,

⁸. Natchez, Mississippi was a notoriously violent place in Southern Mississippi, even by the standards of the era.

when he started demonstrating in Atlanta student movement in 1960, lunch counters were not desegregated, so he lived in segregated society. I used to watch him up close as a father when he was here. He and Alice had five children and he loved having those little kids around him in the office. I got to know him really well when I moved to Atlanta in '69. In fact, when I was leaving Atlanta to go to Tanzania for a year, they gave me a going away party at their house. My sister [Dorie] got married at their house. She was particularly close to them as well.

He was charismatic. He could go toe-to-toe with anyone. He could hold his own in debates. He had several students over the years who interview me for his class he taught here at American University, an oral history class. I went back and looked at the copy of the paper that one of the students wrote. It was well over a hundred pages and had ten pages of documentation. It was just the most amazing thing for an undergraduate that I can imagine. He was so beloved by students, whether they were here or down in Charlottesville at the University of Virginia.

He invited me down to appear on a panel discussion down at UVA. I have a picture of it somewhere. Our relationship continued when he moved here to Washington. I saw him often. One of the things that Julian used to say when he was around SNCC people was that he was closer to some of the people in SNCC than he was to members of his own family. We were on the board together of the SNCC Legacy Project. When Julian was at the meetings he was in his element. He loved being around SNCC people because he said that they came into his life and he into theirs when they were all young people, and were figuring out who they were, being shaped by and helping to shape the change that was occurring in the country at the time. He was a remarkable, remarkable person.

THE LEGACY OF JULIAN BOND

GI: How do you see Julian's legacy in the civil rights movement and as a human rights activist more generally?

JL: I think the first thing I would say is that he stayed the course. Through his entire adult life. He was a strong advocate for civil rights. A lot of people were active in their early years and then dropped off the scene entirely or they would come back for special events. But Julian was very, very consistent with this advocacy. One part of Julian's legacy is his consistency and his lifelong dedication to fighting for the rights of those who need it advocates, most principally African-Americans. But he was equally outspoken on gay rights, for farmworkers, for any group that was being oppressed. He will also be remembered as ma[king] the transition from SNCC to the NAACP leadership almost seamless in a way.

GI: Would you ever have seen that coming?

JL: No, no. I joked with him about being active in the NAACP when he was back in Atlanta. I said, "From SNCC to the NAACP? Remember how we were regarded by the NAACP as troublemakers, and we thought they were like old fogies and were too conservative for us?" And he just smiled and laughed. I think also his legacy is that that, one, he held seat in the

Georgia House [of Representatives] at a time when it was almost unimaginable. He had a political strong political legacy as well. To be a candidate for vice president of the United States? Again, that was just unheard of at that time. His political legacy, I think, is quite secure. He also shaped the way we viewed a lot about how we viewed the twenty-first century America in his writings and in his eloquent way of analyzing and expressing things, like the chronicler of our era. He could articulate better than almost anyone I knew how our generation viewed the world and our place in it.

At his very best Julian was a historian. He helped to shape how we view the world around us, but he also helped to shape it in himself. There was an interaction between his own activism and how he was able to get others teaching and lecturing through his activism to understand the perspective from the activist. I remember having a conversation with him once about teaching. I was so impressed with the fact that, in his later years, when he turned to teaching because in so much of his other work, he had done just that – communicating and [being the] SNCC communications director. He was teaching people in the outside world how to understand teaching them about what was going on in those remote communities by sending out releases, by calling, by going on shows to discuss what was happening in the civil rights movement. He communicated throughout his life at every level. When he had his own TV show, I remember going on at once. He and Armstrong Williams, I believe, had that show together and they interviewed me.⁹ He was very smart, very, very intelligent, high IQ and he could make the connections between what happened then and Black Lives Matter today. He saw the continuum of struggle.

It is not surprising to me that in his later years he turned to teaching. His occupation was teaching. He taught this wonderful class an oral history of the civil rights movement. Several of his students interviewed me for their projects and the one I was most impressed by was that young man who came to my apartment and he interviewed me. He produced a paper that was about a hundred and fifty pages, which was amazing. My interview was actually a kind of springboard for him to talk about historical events about the contemporary society in which we live. Julian was a great mentor. I think he will be known particularly by students as having been of an excellent mentor for young people. He was always a very patient person. Even back then, you really saw him get angry or ruffled. I used to watch him play with his little children, baby in his arms and another one down here on the floor. He had just such tremendous patience. I saw that same temperament expressed in his later years in life. I mentioned earlier that he was on the board of the SNCC Legacy Project.¹⁰ As soon as he came to a meeting any or SNCC event, I mean he just was a different person. He was right in the heart of it, right in the middle of it. He was in his element, in other words. Julian was a wonderful, a great person. Gone much too soon. Those of us who knew him for fifty or more years, we're still pained by his passing. He left a powerful legacy behind.

⁹. Dr. Ladner is referring to *America's Black Forum*, which has run on public broadcasting stations since 1977. Julian Bond hosted the show from 1980-1997.

¹⁰. For more on the SNCC Legacy Project, see <https://www.snclegacyproject.org>. For more on the history of SNCC, see the SNCC Digital Gateway Project <https://snccdigital.org>, which contains an abundance of resources on the people who made up SNCC, their work, links to documents and papers and much more.

