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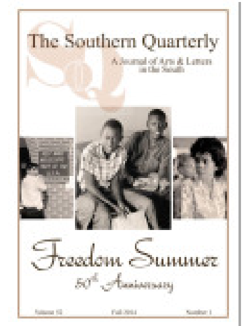

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"I Just Had a Fire!": An Interview with Dorie Ann Ladner*

EMILYE CROSBY

Although I didn't meet Dorie Ladner until April 2010, she helped shape the world that I grew up in. She and others in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were the "shock troops," the cutting edge of the civil rights movement. Founded out of the 1960 sit-ins, the young people in SNCC led the way in challenging and defeating segregation in public accommodations. They also moved into rural southern communities, organizing and working with local residents on registering to vote, trying to breathe life into what was ostensibly a constitutionally-protected right. Born and raised in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, by the time Dorie and her younger sister Joyce Ladner encountered the sit-in movement in their first year of college at Jackson State, they already had years of experience attending meetings of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). They were mentored by three men who would eventually lose their lives as a result of their civil rights activism: Medgar Evers, Clyde Kennard, and Vernon Dahmer.[1] Dorie Ladner describes being deeply affected by the murder of Emmett Till, and it seems almost preordained that she would join the emerging student movement at the first opportunity. In fact, she was expelled from Jackson State in spring 1961 because she offered a prayer with political undertones. Transferring to Tougaloo College introduced Ladner to an intellectually stimulating environment. She recalls, "I'd never been so happy in my life!" Being at Tougaloo also made it

* This text is drawn from an interview conducted by Crosby, as well as two public presentations by Ladner (an April 2010 Brown University Symposium and an April 2014 Plenary at the Organization of American Historians meeting in Atlanta). The material has been consolidated, organized, and edited for clarity and readability (by Crosby). Emilye Crosby thanks Elizabeth Dierenfield and Laura Emiko Soltis for transcribing assistance and the James Weldon Johnson Institute at Emory University and SUNY Geneseo for fellowship and travel support for interviews with Dorie Ladner. Crosby and Ladner both thank Deborah Menkart and Julian Hipkins of Teaching for Change for their help.

easier for her to connect with the "freedom riders" who were helping to build the Mississippi movement. In summer 1962, she joined Bob Moses, who was gathering a small group of organizers, and began working on voter registration in small communities throughout the state, but mostly in the Delta. She was present at the founding of COFO, the Council of Federated Organizations, a coalition group that shaped the Mississippi movement.

This interview with Dorie Ladner points to some of the reasons local, bottom-up history is important. Big event, top-down history has a tendency to overstate the significance of major leaders, federal action, and the role of whites. It can obscure the extensive nature of white resistance and how much it was intertwined with state power. And it can understate the importance of—to borrow from scholar Charles Payne—"ordinary people doing extraordinary things." In Ladner's account, the federal government feels distant. Neither the Kennedys nor Lyndon Johnson initiated or "saved" the movement. The Mississippi movement was moved forward by people like Dorie Ladner—young people and Mississippians. In fact, as Ladner reminds us, the movement was made up of a relatively small number of college-aged organizers who joined forces with an older generation. And while they held mass meetings and organized freedom days, mock elections, and even an occasional march, the heart of the movement was going door-to-door, day-after-day, teaching, building relationships, and offering encouragement. Together, the young organizers and

SNCC Field Secretary Dorie Ladner speaking passionately to the volunteers in a training session on nonviolent self-defense, June 1964. Oxford, Ohio. Used by permission of the photographer, Herbert Randall. Photograph courtesy of McCain Library & Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi (Hattiesburg, MS), M351-055.

their community families built a movement, and they did it in the face of job loss, eviction, and even the murder of friends, allies, and mentors.

For those (like many of my students), who think the worst thing African Americans faced was separate water fountains and that resistance was carried out by a few marginal Klansmen, Ladner's account offers a devastating corrective with its description of unrelenting white violence and harassment, at least some of it directly tied to those in power. For example, Ladner recalls her admiration for Fannie Lou Hamer, who walked away from her home and job rather than withdraw her voter registration application. But she also describes how upset Mrs. Hamer was the night she had to leave her husband behind on the plantation. As Ladner says, she and Colia Liddell "huddled around [Mrs. Hamer] and started singing freedom songs. We had nothing to offer her but songs." Almost a year later, in June 1963, Ladner watched President John Kennedy's strongest civil rights speech, one that framed civil rights as a moral issue and announced the legislation that eventually became the Civil Rights Act of 1964. But any joy she might have experienced was overwhelmed by the murder that same night of her long-time mentor, Medgar Evers. In the wake of Evers's murder, Ladner confronted Jackson police officers outside the Masonic Temple and later defied police efforts to control the memorial march. She was determined that Evers's body be carried past the state capitol building, her way of taking a stand and highlighting the culpability of white officials. African American anger boiled over that day and, after Ladner's arrest, the defiant crowd reacted to police intimidation by throwing bricks and bottles. The Justice Department's John Doar stepped between the protesters and police, and at least some people believe he helped prevent more bloodshed. The reality of black anger is another aspect of movement history that does not fit well with the popular story defined by nonviolent protest and uplifting moral victory.

The top-down story of the movement is also dominated by men to the point that most people have a hard time naming any women other than Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King. In fact, in the early 1960s in Mississippi, Dorie Ladner was one of the few women working in the field. Raised by an independent-minded mother and nurtured by a large extended family, Ladner was so determined to, as she says, "work for my freedom" and "liberate" her people, she didn't think twice about ignoring the larger society's gender role expectations, even when it meant sharing work and beds in close quarters and dangerous situations. Ladner helps us develop a nuanced understanding of women working in SNCC and the movement more widely, acknowledging the gender conventions of the day even as she describes ignoring them. Moreover, although Ladner's role as a fieldworker was initially unusual, she concludes her interview with rich descriptions of some of the black Mississippi women who were absolutely crucial to the movement. As Ladner recalls, some of these women cooked and

did office work. Many more housed workers, attended mass meetings, and worked on voter registration. And in almost every community, a few stepped forward, making principled stands and emerging as leaders, the people others looked to and followed. Some of these women, most prominently Mrs. Hamer, even moved onto the national stage, speaking for the movement and running for Congress.

The movement and women like Ladner not only helped end legalized racial discrimination, they also helped inspire legislation banning gender discrimination (which was added to the Civil Rights Act of 1964) and ignited the late 1960s women's movement. At the same time, perhaps what is most important is the way Ladner and so many others rose to the occasion, growing, developing, and doing things they never imagined doing. Ladner herself was motivated by a fierce desire for freedom—to expand her world and possibilities—and by a determination to challenge injustice, in whatever forms it might take. Dorie Ladner is a remarkable woman, one from whom we can all learn. She still carries her childhood hunger for learning and retains a fierce compassion for the downtrodden. I invite you to read this interview and remember the movement was only possible because Dorie Ladner and others stepped up and made it happen.

The State University of New York, Geneseo

EC: Can you tell me about your background?

DL: I grew up in Palmer's Crossing, Mississippi, which is right off Highway 49, going down to the Gulf Coast, to New Orleans, Louisiana. Palmer's Crossing was a small, segregated town with a school and a church, and everybody knew each other. My father, Eunice Ladner, was from Pearl River County, and his family moved to California quite early on. And after my parents' divorce, my mother remarried and had six children. And I had a very large extended family that we drew upon—my grandmother and my mother and her ten brothers and sisters.

I'm a product of segregation. I grew up in a closed society where we had limited access to books and newspapers. Everything was geared towards segregation. But I grew up in an independent family with a curious mind, always wanting to know what was on the outside. My dreaming every day was beyond Palmer's Crossing, wanting to know what was beyond Palmer's Crossing and Mississippi.

I grew up in a house with a very strong mother whose family was very, very independent. Mother taught us from the age of three on up, to not ever bow to anyone, no matter what their color was. She grew up in Wayne County, Mississippi, from the Woullard and Gates family. They were independent people who owned their own land and they were self-sufficient. Mother started training us not to let anybody abuse us, or mistreat us, and to always look white people in the eye when you talk to them. Never look down, never look back. She used to say, "I grew up with them, I fought with them." So I grew up with that and it wasn't a violent kind of lesson, but it was one of independence. And I took that to heart.

EC: Where do you think your mother got that attitude from?

DL: From her father and her mother. My grandfather was described as a man who only worked for himself, and he told his children to work for themselves, don't work for anybody else. And they handed it down. They were a close knit family. And they were—How would I describe? They didn't identify as white nor black. Meaning that they said, "We're Indians," and I never saw them as being black or white, if you can understand what I'm saying. And the community that they grew up in, they were mixed with a lot of the families there in the community. The whites, the blacks, and so forth.

EC: Did other people see them that way?

DL: Yes, to a large degree. I couldn't understand it until much, much later in life. And I don't know how to put it other than, they didn't go around saying

anything; that was just the way they saw themselves. I had all this stored up, but I still identified myself as black.

I attended segregated schools and never had a new textbook. The school we attended had very poor equipment, but the teachers were very devoted to us. We learned and made things in spite of the surroundings and the things we had to undergo, like feces running outside of the toilet onto the school grounds, before we got a new school—Earl Travillion Attendance Center (near Hattiesburg).

Hattiesburg in itself wasn't blatantly racist, in the sense that we were sharecroppers, none of that. It was a laid back town near the Gulf Coast and New Orleans. Our community had school teachers, preachers, bar owners, night clubs, maids. But we had to seek medical treatment at Charity Hospital in New Orleans because the hospitals in Hattiesburg didn't accept blacks to be treated. And another thing that struck me was the University of Southern Mississippi, or Mississippi Southern at that time, was segregated, but when my sister Joyce and I used to go downtown, we would see kids from Latin America who were brown and they were speaking in a language that we didn't understand. And we heard that they built a special dorm for them. And we were saying, "Now if they're going to bring them and build a dorm for them, then why do we have to go to Jackson or somewhere else for college?" And they had William Carey College there also. Those two institutions I think lifted some of the pressure, racial hostility, that would have been perpetrated against us as blacks. But we still had to go ninety miles north to school. Fortunately, we were able to go. My uncle sent Joyce and my father sent me, so luckily we had the opportunity.

Our community was an outpost of Camp Shelby. Hattiesburg had a dichotomy of being a very religious town and also a place with a lot of night life. The street we grew up on was just colorful, especially on the weekends. I think nearly everybody on the street sold liquor but us, bootleg liquor. *(laughs)* They made their livelihoods off of that because the work for African Americans was very menial for the most part, if you were not a minister or a schoolteacher. And the sheriff would come and collect money every week, every Monday, going up and down my street, sticking his hand out the window, going around to all the houses. Because Palmer's Crossing was the outpost for the GIs, they had nightclubs and liquor flowing. And you could do whatever you wanted to do in Palmer's. The music would play loud. Everybody had jukeboxes. And you could just hear the music blasting, and I grew up with an appreciation of blues. I can remember the men driving up there on Friday afternoon, trucks would come in, and they would start playing that music, and let it roll until late Saturday night. And things would close down, people would get dressed, and go to church. This is just a flavor of my childhood. I also grew up in the church as well, and my parents didn't drink or smoke. So when we went to the Chicken Shack to get sodas or something, the owner would say, "Don't

bother those girls, those are nice little girls. They live right down the street." So we would get the sodas and come on out, and go on back home. All those ingredients—the bootleg liquor and the church—went into my being who I am, along with the foundation my mother had given us.

My awakening [to the civil rights movement] came from the death of Emmett Till. He's a young boy who was killed in Mississippi and thrown into the Tallahatchie River. I was around his age and when we saw the photograph of him I said "Oh, my God, oh my God." The Emmett Till murder left a strong impression on me. I said, if they did it to him, they'll do it to me. I over-identified with him to an extent that I just felt that they were going to come get me out of my bed at night. I would cover my head up, thinking that the same thing would happen. J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant were known to be guilty, but found not guilty. I saw the picture of them smiling and laughing after the verdict and I'm saying, "Why aren't they going to jail?" Now I'm believing in—black or white—if you're guilty, you go to jail. But you know that wasn't the case. I was reading the newspaper about the trial every day I could and there was something in it about the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. I went to my social studies teacher and asked, "What does this mean?" He said "Oh this has something to do with the Constitution," so I went and got the Constitution and memorized the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, the Preamble, and America's Creed in order to feel empowered. This wasn't really related to any particular thing because there were no demonstrations or anything.

EC: When Emmett Till was murdered, and the killers were acquitted were people in your community or family talking to you about this?

DL: There were whispers around the community. There was a paper in Petal, Mississippi; the editor there, P. D. East, was known to be liberal or something.[2] And we just heard waves. We were young and we were trying to piece all this together, but we couldn't exactly put it together cause we had no frame of reference.

EC: Do you remember hearing about the sit-ins? When they started?

DL: No, and just a little about Rosa Parks. Just a little. I heard something about a boycott in Alabama. But we didn't get any news and I still resent that right now, the blackout, or you could say white-out, of news. Even when I got to college, we still didn't get news. I resented it. Now I loved to read, I loved to read. And there was one medicine man, Dr. McCloud, and he would bring *Jet* and *Ebony*, and the *Chicago Defender*, and I would read those. He'd talk to mother and he sold root medicine, but he was also selling NAACP memberships. And my

sister Joyce and I were eleven and twelve, always curious, wanted to know more. And so, these people left a lasting impression. It wasn't like I wanted to go and listen to the radio. I wanted to hear what he had to say, because he was from North Carolina, somewhere else. And we didn't meet people traveling back and forth. The Illinois Central train going to New Orleans would come through, going back and forth in our community, but people weren't traveling. So we were isolated.

EC: Seems like you were always hungry.

DL: *Oh, yes, yes, yes!*

EC: Can you tell me more about your influences?

DL: I'm very privileged to have been mentored by the late Clyde Kennard. He was the first black who attempted to enroll at the University of Southern Mississippi, and subsequently died a very horrible death. He was a student at the University of Chicago and came home when his mother was ill to run the family chicken farm. To continue his studies, he attempted to enroll in Mississippi Southern. He had gotten locked up for allegedly bringing liquor on campus and subsequently was falsely convicted of receiving five sacks of stolen chicken feed and was given seven years of hard labor at Parchman Penitentiary. Before that, he was arrested and kept in jail downtown and the most humiliating thing to me was to walk past this jail downtown and not being able to gain access, was scared to death, didn't know how to do this. He had been our NAACP youth leader.

I was also influenced by the late Vernon Dahmer. He was killed by the Klan. He was a very independent man, owned a lot of land, and was a hard worker. In 1964 he housed a lot of Freedom Summer volunteers. He and his sister Eileen Beard used to drive my sister and me to NAACP meetings in Jackson. My mother let us go with Eileen Beard because she played the piano at our church. That's where I saw NAACP head Roy Wilkins and met Medgar Evers, the man who communicated with us at the age of fourteen. I'm sitting there in awe and with this curiosity, knowing something wasn't right because we always got second- and third-hand books and our school was inadequate. He could make me understand that I was living a life that was not fruitful, in the sense that segregation had its limitations, meaning that we didn't have sidewalks, we didn't have paved streets, we couldn't sit down in Woolworth's. The bus that we rode back and forth to town, we had to sit in the rear. Though we could go downtown to pay bills, we couldn't stop at the counter. And I remember buying peanut candy and going to the segregated toilets at Sears. White ladies

and colored women. I always looked at that, trying to figure out white ladies, colored women—I would stare at it. What was the difference? White water fountain, colored water fountain? So these types of things were going on.

EC: It seems like you all had important mentors. Do you think they recognized that in you? Did you seek them out?

DL: They came to us. See, growing up the way we did, in the South, children didn't engage with adults. So they spoke to us. And we really didn't know what questions to ask, because we lived in an all-black community. We heard mother whispering about Mack Charles Parker and Emmett Till, but there were no questions. I don't think I mentioned Mack Parker, but he was murdered, taken out of jail, and thrown into Pearl River after being killed.[3]

EC: How did all this impact you?

DL: After having met Medgar Evers when I was a teenager, and going to NAACP meetings in Jackson with the late Vernon Dahmer and Eileen Beard, and knowing Clyde Kennard, who had attempted enroll in the University of Southern Mississippi, I had a consciousness about my rights. All of this, putting it all together with having a mother in a family that had grown up, more or less, integrated in Wayne County, and who always told us to stand up for our rights, encouraged me to seek justice. So I took all of this with me to Jackson State. I had been exposed *just a little*. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. *(laughs)*

EC: Can you tell me about going to Jackson State?

DL: When Joyce and I went to Jackson State, we were going to visit Medgar Evers every Wednesday. We had a half day at Jackson State and his office was right across the street. We would talk to him and I was so enthusiastic about it. He talked to us about things that were going to come, about Mississippi being the black belt, with a large black majority. We couldn't register to vote, but still we were paying taxes. And I'm listening to all of this and trying to put it into some perspective. He was a man who engaged young people. He wanted us to develop, and he wanted us to know about our civil rights, and was happy to tell us about our rights. And I wanted to know! So he was a teacher. And one who was enthusiastic. And my father's relatives, the Dixons, had a gas station right there on Rose Street. And they used to take us to NAACP meetings on the weekends in Jackson. And they even let us drink some liquor.

EC: *(Laughs)* NAACP meetings *and* liquor?

DL: Yeah!!! *Yeah.*

EC: Did your mother know that you were going to meetings?

DL: Yeah, mother didn't care. Because Mr. Evers saw mother in Hudson's Store at Palmer's Crossing and she gave him money to bring back to us. She never said "don't." So if she didn't say "don't"—

EC: Then you know you're okay.

DL: Yeah! And "if you don't go, I'm going anyhow." Once you get that spirit in you, you are gonna go anyhow.[4]

EC: You mentioned organizing a group at Jackson State, can you tell me about that?

DL: Yes, it was primarily a group of upper classmen, and fraternity and sorority people. Along with my sister Joyce, I joined Delta Sigma Theta sorority. We would sit in the recreation hall and talk. We were not interested in the next dress or the next blues song, but more serious things about equal rights under the law. James Meredith was one of our mentors, and he was mapping strategies.[5] Before the Tougaloo Nine,[6] we were doing things like complaining about the food in the cafeteria. It started out like that and it got bigger, and so when the Tougaloo Nine came, it had escalated and we wanted to be a part of it. I think Meredith may have helped steered us. I didn't know then, but I'm happy that he did it. Medgar's influence was also helping us to go forward. I give the two of them praise.

EC: Were the students who gathered, you mentioned the fraternities and the sororities, were these people who would be considered leaders on campus?

DL: Yes. One was Walter Williams, who was president of student government. Later the president assailed him when he was praying to support the Tougaloo Nine and he got expelled from the campus. There weren't a lot of girls, now that I'm thinking about it.

EC: There weren't?

DL: No, no. I've always been surrounded by guys for the most part. There were a few girls, but not a lot.

EC: Did you think about that at the time?

DL: No. I found the guys more interesting and daring than women. Women had a lot of other things going on, maybe getting their hair done or something, and I wasn't interested in that. My mind was more directed on how I was going to survive in this God-forsaken society that I couldn't breathe in. It was—how do you call it? Dr. Silver? *The Closed Society*?[7] I couldn't breathe. And see, we were so deprived. Like growing up, we didn't have books to read, we couldn't go to the library. I still think I should have had the right to go in there. Go in the swimming pool. We couldn't sit at the lunch counter. Not like we had a whole bunch of money, but we couldn't spend the little pennies that we had. We couldn't sit at the soda fountain and get sodas. These were the small things, but they meant a lot. It was your dignity that you were more concerned about than anything else. So it wore on me that, here I am, I haven't never done anything to anyone, I've never been arrested, my family was upstanding in the community, they paid taxes. Why shouldn't we be treated like everyone else?

But getting back to Jackson State—We heard through Medgar that Tougaloo college students were going to sit in at the public library. We were told we couldn't participate because we would get expelled, but we were told we could have a prayer meeting on the campus to join in solidarity. After dinner and after library, we attempted to have a prayer around the reflecting pool that was at the center of campus. Someone told the President, who was Jacob Reddix, that we were out there demonstrating and he came out and started flailing his arms and knocking students down. He knocked my sister Joyce's roommate down on the ground and started screaming. We ran to our dorms after we saw the police come on campus. The President ordered the girl who had fallen to be sent home that night. She lived in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, on the Gulf Coast, which was close to two hundred miles from Jackson State. Her parents had to come pick her up and take her home.

So the very next morning, they brought police dogs on the campus. I'd never seen a police dog in my life. And right now, there are many people in my building who have dogs, and I'm scared. They don't understand why, but there's a whole lot of fear. They brought the police dogs on campus, but we were determined to march in solidarity with the Tougaloo Nine. So when we started up Lynch Street—which is now Martin Luther King—going down towards downtown, they had thrown a barricade across the street. These deputized sanitation workers. So we turned and went to Rose Street, which was in a residential area. Boy, they threw the tear gas. Oh my God! One of the upperclassmen from Clarksdale got tear gas all in his eyes. People let us in their homes. One lady said "Come in, baby." I washed the tear gas off of my face and off my back, because tear gas burns, very badly. She said, "Come and sit on the

porch." I sat on the porch like I lived there and the police with these dogs were running down the alley behind these little shotgun houses. All of us were able to get into a house. Someone told us that white women in that community let some of the students crawl under their house to escape from the police. None of us were arrested; none of us had to go to the hospital. At dusk-dark, we went back to the campus. After that, the president called an early spring break, so school was over. That was my first exposure to the reality of how the state can come against you, really come against you. My sister Joyce and I were asked to leave because I had prayed a prayer in the dorm asking for peace in the world. At the time I was president of the dorm council and I grew up in a community where prayer had been part of our daily life. This repression didn't deter me from wanting to be a freedom rider. I've always been a determined person, one who was, I guess, very "head strong," I would say. But other people may call it a lot of other things.

EC: I always wonder, obviously it's a big deal to get to college at that time.

DL: It was.

EC: And to be up against what the state of Mississippi can offer. You've already seen the murders of Emmett Till and Mack Parker and Clyde Kennard in jail. How do you face all of what you're up against and go forward in that situation?

DL: Well, I'm not sure. It was the consciousness. My level of consciousness was raised to a degree that would make me get out of bed early and get to the cafeteria at six o'clock in the morning to put flyers out about a demonstration. I had that zeal early on, to make me want to do this. I'm not sure what was motivating me, but I knew that wrong was wrong, and I wanted to make it right. And this was just a little small time thing right then.

EC: What happened after you left Jackson State?

DL: Joyce and I had the nerve to ask our father if we could go on the freedom ride and he said "No." So that was the end of that.

EC: How did you hear about the freedom rides?

DL: From the news. And we had also been told that some people were coming through Jackson to help us get our freedom. And we didn't know exactly how or who, but "help us get our freedom" sounded good to me. I wanted to be there, but we left shortly after the summer started and went straight to Chicago

and worked until that fall when we enrolled in Tougaloo College. And that was providence. Oh, I'd never been so happy in my life! Tougaloo was an exceptional school, in that you could sit on the grass, you could talk. Boys would come in the dorm, whereas at Jackson State you had to be in your room at nine o'clock and you couldn't come out. And so people like Pete Seeger were coming on campus. Joan Baez came on campus, Bob Dylan came on campus and Martin Luther King. Many, many people came. And it was just a place for growth and development and intellectual challenge for me.

And as soon as we got back from Chicago, there was a SNCC meeting at the Masonic Temple there. I went in and saw John Lewis, Chuck McDew, Marion Barry, Tom Hayden, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Paul Brooks, Bernard Lafayette, all these young people. Now these were young people who were thinking the same things that I had been thinking, but I didn't know them, I didn't know they existed because I was living in a whole 'nother world. And when I saw them, it was like "Oh my God! Where have you been all my life?! I've been looking for you all my life!" It was just the greatest joy I have ever had. These were young people who thought the way I did and I didn't know that they existed.

Some of them were getting ready to leave Jackson, and some were staying. They had met at the at the Masonic Temple to discuss strategy. I started working with the ones who stayed. Paul Brooks and his wife Catherine ran the office there in Jackson on Lynch Street. They were freedom riders from Tennessee, and Catherine had attended Tennessee State. They were living in the Freedom House on Rose Street. After meeting the freedom riders and visiting the office, I devoted time to my studies at Tougaloo and also became interested in learning about community organizing, nonviolence, and voter registration. After my classes, I would regularly go to the office and the Freedom House, to work and to attend meetings conducted by Diane Nash, James Bevel, Bernard Lafayette, and Paul and Catherine Brooks, and other freedom riders who were in the state. And we would talk with whoever was at the Freedom House or came through because we had the opportunity to meet people like Larry Still, who was writing for *Jet* magazine. Other journalists from the Black Press would come through to investigate cases, like the murder of Corporal Roman Duckworth.[8] It was so engaging to get a chance to meet people who had ideas and were broadening my mind and giving me more information, I was always seeking information about my freedom and my rights.

EC: What kind of work would you do when you were at the office in Jackson?

DL: I would mainly go on Saturdays, sometimes during the week if I got a ride in. I didn't cut classes for the most part, but it was mainly going over

voter registration lists. See, SNCC had two projects—direct action and voter registration. And so we were geared toward the voter registration. Getting people to register to vote was like direct action in the sense that you would have to go and blend in with the cotton pickers to go into the fields and talk to them.

EC: Was voter registration your choice or was that what people wanted you to do?

DL: That's what was there. They'd had that discussion down in McComb, Mississippi, I understand. So we were knocking on doors asking people about voter registration. I met Colia Liddell, who had attended Tougaloo and was working for Medgar Evers. She was president of the North Jackson NAACP and invited John Salter to attend a meeting with us. He became like an advisor, but we were already organized.

When school was out that year, I decided I was going to commit myself to the movement. I went home that summer of '62 and packed a little orange suitcase. I told my mother. "I'm going to Jackson to work with Bob Moses to get my freedom," and I dashed out the door. Before Mother could turn around, I was gone. I got down to the Greyhound bus station, got on a bus to Jackson, went to the Freedom House on Rose Street.

EC: You didn't give her a chance to respond?

DL: No. Mother was overwhelmed with her children and so forth. I had been the care provider for most of my younger siblings and I was tired of that, too. I knew there was nothing around Hattiesburg for me to do. And I knew I wanted to continue my fight for justice, so I was gone. I said I was going to work for my freedom.

I was the only female staying there in the Freedom House until Sheila Michaels came from the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) in New York. She moved in and we shared a room together. I had moved into the room where Diane Nash and James Bevel had stayed until they moved on to Cleveland, Mississippi, to work with Amzie Moore. I have a very strong personality, I guess, because staying with those guys, like Lawrence Guyot, Curtis Hayes, Hollis Watkins, and others, didn't scare me. If anything, I think they were kind of scared of me at times. *(laughing)* I didn't cook. I didn't learn how to sew at home, because I always felt that if I learned those things that I would be a housewife. I didn't want to be a housewife. I had to help babysit and I don't like dirt, so I learned how to clean, but that was it. Mother said, "You go to school, get an education, work, take care of yourself. Don't tell any man to take care of you. You marry when you can't do anything else."

In the Freedom House, we had this little group and Bob Moses was our mentor, more or less. Colia wasn't staying there, but she would come over and cook. She said she didn't know how to cook either, but she has a lot of brothers, so she would watch what her brothers were doing. She would come in and scramble the eggs for us, make some bread or something, and feed us. And Colia was working with the North Jackson NAACP and Medgar Evers at the time, so that's how SNCC started bonding with Mr. Evers. Medgar Evers was following us because we were energetic. We infused energy.

EC: Can you tell me about nonviolence? Sort of what you thought about it and the conversations you all would have?

DL: We would talk about how to protect ourselves, number one, mainly. Cover your head, and your stomach, your vital parts of your body, ball up in a knot, you know, a fetal position. And we were encouraged to be nonviolent, not to strike, to engage the perpetrator. We were encouraged to try and find their moral center. I heard Harry Belafonte say that Dr. King said, "Help Robert Kennedy find his moral center." *(laughing)*

EC: Who was promoting nonviolence?

DL: It was usually promoted, to be honest, when we were getting ready to go on demonstration. We would sit down and talk. "Nobody's gonna pass a lick." "Everybody knows how to act." "Don't be out there fighting." I don't think Bob Moses would hit anyone, but he never said, "Okay, everybody's going to be nonviolent." He never said much of anything. I'm going to tell you something real funny and scary, speaking of Bob. We had come down from Cleveland one Sunday in this old Packard and stopped at this A&W Root Beer place in Jackson. Bob gets out and we were gonna get us some root beer. Here comes this white man, the store manager, with a white shirt on, with his pistol, waving his pistol. "Y'all get the f___ away from here. Get away." From the car, we were saying, "Come on, Bob! Come on!" He told the man, "We're going to leave, but you're not going to shoot us." We're saying, "Come on Bob, come on Bob, come on Bob!" "We're going to leave, but you're not going to shoot us." And here we are just trying to get away. Now that's the nonviolence he practiced. Another time we were on our way to Atlanta and the same thing happened. We had wanted to use the bathroom and a guy picked up a tire iron. Bob did the same thing, he said, "We're leaving, but you don't have to do all of that." Jim Lawson had studied nonviolence, as you know, with the masters, and Diane Nash and James Bevel, Catherine Brooks, and all them from Nashville, had been taught by him. We were the spin-off, and there were a lot of local young

guys like Charles McLaurin. You know, they were nonviolent tactically, but not as a way of life. I was never struck, thank God. I don't know how I would have responded. I don't know.

EC: Did you believe it would work to transform people?

DL: Yes and no. Because I never really had the opportunity to engage segregationists like I'm doing a dialogue with you. Whenever we engaged them, it was like a confrontation-type set-up, like in Woolworths, or on the picket line, and so forth. If we had had the opportunity to sit down with our peers, we may have been able to talk as peers about issues, but there was a barrier. Students from Millsaps used to come in to Tougaloo to the social Science forums that Professor Ernst Borinski would have. They came when Joan Baez came to Tougaloo and sang.

EC: Did they ever do any work in Jackson? Or would they just come to Tougaloo for the conversation and the events?

DL: I don't recall them doing any work. I've heard of moderates, but I used to say, "Where are they? We need them!" I wanted them to come. When we were in McComb in fall 1964, Reverend Harry Bowie said he knew a moderate minister there. I said, "Well, talk to him and see if he can't stop this bombing. We want them to come out." And I was also told there was some white woman in Natchez who worked with the priest and was working with the Freedom Democratic Party, but I didn't know her. I didn't know who she was. A lot of local whites knew what was going on, but they were scared, I imagine. They would have really been ostracized and hurt real badly. A lot of them said much later, we freed them as well.

EC: What were you doing in summer of 1962?

DL: We were studying and learning how to do community organizing. We studied the Mississippi constitution, which had to be interpreted by voters, and the process of community organizing, which included canvassing door-to-door, meeting people in communities, and how to hold mass meetings. Voter registration required a lot of time and organization. The nucleus of the group was Lawrence Guyot, Hollis Watkins, Curtis Hayes, Dewey Greene, Charles McLaurin, James Jones, Luvaughn Brown. We went to McComb, Mississippi, and took a group of people to the courthouse in Liberty to attempt to get them to register to vote. They were all denied. As I stayed there that day, I noticed separate water fountains, colored and white. Liberty is where Herbert Lee

was killed by state Representative E. H. Hurst. There was never a trial or any justice for that.[9]

In August we went up to Clarksdale to found COFO, which is the Council of Federated Organizations—an umbrella organization with the NAACP, SCLC, CORE, and SNCC. This umbrella organization was the one that sponsored the Freedom Summer project. This was my first time into the Delta after hearing about Emmett Till's murder. We went to the church that Aaron Henry, the state president of the NAACP, had set up. Within the hour, the firemen came in with their firehoses saying that there was a fire in the place. There was a fire, but not one that they could put out. We faced that kind of harassment. And I didn't know anything about sundown laws but there was a curfew on at twelve midnight in Clarksdale. Blacks were not allowed to be on the street past twelve midnight. As we started coming out of the church, they started locking people up. Dave Dennis, who was a CORE organizer, was driving our car, trying to get to Mound Bayou, an all-black town. Jim Forman passed us flying. These streets are dark. You know how dark they are. We're trying to get to Mound Bayou. We got stopped. There were three girls in the car—which was significant because females didn't participate in that type of process—Colia Liddell, Mattie Bivins (who was dating Dave and is my relative), and myself, along with Lester McKinney. The highway patrolman talked to Dave for almost an hour about his blue eyes and his pedigree and so forth. Then Dave came back to the car and said, "This cat's gonna take me to jail and you all follow me back to the jail. And he's gonna lock me up." So we turned around and followed him back to the jail. Then we get to the jail, they said, "Get the f___ out of Clarksdale." Oh my God! And here we were, just riding in circles, not knowing where we were going until it was like six o'clock in the morning. We approached the town of Ruleville. The speed limit was twenty miles per hour and I said, "Lester, don't go over twenty and don't go under twenty." I was petrified because S. D. Milam, whose brother had killed Emmett Till, was a patrolman in Ruleville. We spent a whole long time trying to get out of the Delta. We ended up in Amzie Moore's house in Cleveland. He was the president of the local NAACP and James Bevel and Diane Nash were already there to do community organizing. We decided we were going to stay right here. We "cast our buckets down" and started working in the Delta.[10] We were going to work right here. That had already been planned by Amzie Moore who wanted us to come there and break that cycle of sharecropping and try to get black voter registration done. That was one of the black belt areas and the Voter Education Project and others were putting money into it. There was a whole political thing behind it, but the Kennedy administration was not *that* cooperative.

After the founding of COFO, some of us went to Ruleville, where Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer was from. We decided that some of the fieldworkers would

go out onto the plantations to attempt to recruit blacks to register. This was mainly men, because some of the guys decided the females would work in the community because they felt it was safer for us to do that. The men dressed like the sharecroppers so they would not be recognized and by the end of August, we were able to get a busload of people to go to Indianola to register to vote, including Mrs. Hamer. While the busload of people waited all day to try to register, fieldworkers went through Indianola, knocking on doors to get people in the city to head to the courthouse to try to register. We stayed all day, but no one was registered. As we left Indianola, the bus was stopped by local authorities and the bus driver was fined for driving the wrong colored bus. When Mrs. Hamer got home, the plantation owner B. D. Marlowe put her off his plantation, because she refused his demand to take her name "off the books." She told him that she didn't go to register for him, but to register for herself. It was agreed that her husband Pap would have to remain on the plantation and work until the crops were finished, because they owed money. Mrs. Hamer left him and came to the church crying. When Colia and I found out what was wrong, we huddled around her and started singing freedom songs. We had nothing to offer her but songs, and we started singing and so forth. She freed herself through her determination.

EC: Charlie Cobb tells me this story about he was in Ruleville with Charles McLaurin. . . [11]

DL: I was there with Charlie because *we* convinced Charlie to stay, because he was on his way to Texas for a CORE workshop. He stopped at the Jackson office to talk to us. We didn't know anything about him, except he was a student at Howard University who was interested in the movement.

EC: Mmm hmm. Yeah, he says that. And he says he was in Ruleville for a little bit with McLaurin and James Jones and he heard that you and Colia Liddell were coming. He told me that they had this little conversation because they weren't sure they could maintain nonviolence if they saw you being beaten, because you were female. So they were having this conversation about whether you all should come, but before they could finish the conversation, you all were there. Did you have any idea they were having this conversation?

DL: No, but they already knew how mean I was. They were scared.

EC: Yeah, well, he said, "Nobody was gonna tell Dorie she couldn't be there. Or Colia," either one of you all.

DL: No, I didn't know that. But they were as protective as they could be. You know, they would sort of look out for us. For instance, if they were going to go out early in the morning to get on the pickup trucks to go to the fields with the sharecroppers, they would often tell us to stay back because they didn't know what was going to happen. And they wanted to shield us from that.

EC: What would you do when they would go on the trucks and you wouldn't?

DL: Oh, we were walking through the community.

EC: Did you ever object to that?

DL: No, no, no. Because there was no fighting for things to do, no fighting for territory, because all of it was treacherous. So if they felt that they could handle this better. Fine. I'll go out and knock on some doors in Cleveland and talk to people and try to organize. So, no, it was never any issue. And the division of labor was—whoever. We slept together, it was just, we were all neutral in terms of gender. We would all just sleep wherever we could. Because I was the only female, I would sometimes sleep with Willie (Wazir) Peacock.[12] We were all working. And most of the houses were small. We all ate together, slept together, whatever.

EC: Did you ever have any sense, at the time, that you shouldn't be doing this because you were a female?

DL: No, no, no. No, because see, I described us as being so committed, so determined we didn't have time to worry about things like that.

EC: Yeah, well you had to be, right?

DL: We were totally focused on what we were doing. And people did date back and forth, but that was not the main thing that we were concerned about. We were concerned about getting a job done. And you know dating was over there, but your job was to go about trying to liberate your people.

I remember one time, we were somewhere, a place like Mt. Olive, and I was looking for a beauty shop. I have this hair that's very soft and I was complaining about my hair, saying, "Oh, I need my hair pressed." Bob said, "Let it go natural." And I said, "Natural?!" And I have never told anybody this before, but I didn't know what natural meant. You know, you forget all that stuff after awhile because we were working and didn't have the time or the money. The texture of our hair became secondary.

Willie Peacock was brought into the movement in Greenwood, Mississippi. He was on his way to Meharry Medical School when his father brought him to Bob Moses and Amzie Moore, and said, "I'm bringing my son to you to help bring about freedom in this state." Peacock's father and Amzie Moore were Masons and I didn't understand, but I knew there was some other language being spoken. That was right after when Sam Block and Guyot and all of them jumped out the window in Greenwood because whites were trying to come after them. So Willie Peacock was delivered to Bob with the intended purpose to work for human rights. And there were many others of us in the state who felt that way, but we did not know that there were people outside of our network, you know. In the state of Mississippi, there was a wall of silence. We had no information coming in, no information going out. We didn't know anything that was going on.

EC: What did you did after the summer of 1962?

DL: I went back to Tougaloo but couldn't focus because I had made a commitment to continue working for the movement. All those ingredients were there. I wasn't the only one who joined, but there weren't very many others. Bob had about ten or eleven of us who worked the whole state and Amzie Moore had a big old black Packard that we used that reminded me of Bonnie and Clyde or so forth. We had another car, too. I remember fall 1962 very well because we would be driving from the Delta down to Jackson and James Meredith, who I knew from Jackson State, was trying to integrate Ole Miss. You would turn the radio on and you would hear all these rebel yells and people beginning to fight. That same semester Charles Bracey and I were arrested for picketing Woolworth's in Jackson. We were both students at Tougaloo, and Medgar Evers drove us to Woolworth's and let us out. The whole state was consumed with integration. Because of this I felt a stronger need to continue my work for civil rights.

EC: What else were you doing about that time?

DL: I had left school and spent some time in the Atlanta office. I remember Ruby Doris [Smith Robinson] was at Spelman and Bob Mants was at Morehouse. I was impressed with them because every evening after class, they would come to the SNCC office, go to those papers and start working until seven, eight o'clock, go home, come back the next day. Just completely dedicated. And Ruby took no prisoners. She went to McComb after she'd gotten out of Parchman on the freedom rides. I remember that she came to Tougaloo to visit us. That was brief, but when I dropped out of school to go to work for SNCC, I got to

know her more. She was a thinker and her mind was moving fast, fast. And Bob Mants, too. He was always creative, always. Coming from Mississippi, you know, watching people work behind desks and all of that was new to me. I used to sit there watching them, and they're going through all these papers, I said "Oh!" I'd been in college, but I had not had the experience to come in and run an office or something. But they took over the office. And Jim Forman was there, the executive director of SNCC. Speaking of a leader, Jim Forman had the drive of multitudes of people. In other words, he was able to get things done. You couldn't say no to him. He had the ability to make you feel part of the process. And he was brilliant, just unbelievable, unbelievable.

I asked Ruby Doris Robinson if she could assist me to get to Chicago to visit Clyde Kennard after I told her about his release from Parchman and his illness. She not only provided the money, she gave me an address and phone number for Charlie and Sylvia Fischer, who housed movement people and were very active with Chicago Friends of SNCC. I must say that Charlie was a very active union organizer and unions were very active then. After being in Chicago for a few days, I was able to make contact with Clyde Kennard and schedule a visit at his sister's home. Jimmie Travis from Jackson and I went to see him. Kennard told me about the brutal treatment he received from the prison staff. For instance, after he was diagnosed with stomach cancer at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, they ordered his release, but the guards refused. Instead, they forced him to continue working in the field picking cotton. At times he was so weak he would fall in the mud in the cotton field with a sack attached to his back. The mud was so thick that it would pull the soles off of his boots. He would fall and they would make him get up and keep going. Sometimes the inmates would pick him up and stand him up. When he talked to me, I didn't see any visible anger or bitterness. He encouraged me to continue my education and my work for civil rights. During our visit, he became very tired and had to lie down, but he was very focused on what I had to say. That was the last time I saw him. It was January 1963. Shortly after, he was readmitted to Billingsly Hospital. He died on July 4, 1963.

I left Chicago and went back to Jackson. There was a boycott of downtown Jackson because black citizens were fed up and they had certain demands they wanted from the city. They included being able to try on your clothes before purchasing them, black police officers, and the right to be able to sit down at lunch counters, integrate schools, and other such demands. It was during this boycott that Medgar was killed. Lena Horne and Floyd Patterson, all them came to Jackson prior to Medgar's death. He had asked them to come down, and I had the opportunity to meet them, not knowing that his death was coming.

Medgar Evers was killed June 12, 1963. That particular night we had had a big mass meeting and that same evening President Kennedy gave a speech

about the civil rights bill. We went to the Elks club afterwards to eat dinner and after we finished Evers said, "I will see you all in the morning." Anne Moody and I were staying with Dave and Mattie Dennis, so we rode back in their car. I had the most restless sleep. The doors were opening and closing, opening and closing, opening and closing, opening and closing. I would fall asleep and wake up over and over again. Mattie came and knocked on my bedroom door and she said "Dorie, Medgar's dead," and I said "I know it," and remained in bed. We got up early the next morning in a catatonic state, not able to talk. We ate a little something, but couldn't look in each other's eyes. We ate with our heads bowed and turned on the TV and watched coverage of George Wallace, who was standing in the schoolhouse door.[13] Then we went to the Masonic Temple. There were two uniformed police officers sitting on motorcycles and I walked up to them, demanding, "Where were you last night? Shoot us in the back like you did Medgar Evers last night. Where were you?" And now that I am older I am thinking they practiced nonviolence with me, because they did not respond. One officer actually dropped his head. I was so angry, so frustrated. I mean hurt, all the emotions that you could think of were there.

I took Anne Moody to Jackson State, even though I had already been expelled from the school, and we tried to organize students and faculty for a mass meeting. Organizing is very difficult around certain issues because people don't want to risk a lot of things. We talked to students on campus who appeared to be very sad as we encouraged them to attend the rally. I took Anne into the administration building as I knew several staff members there. I spoke with Dean Lionel Frazier who openly wept as I spoke with him. Other staff in that area seemed to be in a state of shock, but none of them joined the mass meetings at local churches. I was disappointed that none of them came forward. Sometimes you have to risk.

There were only a few of us meeting and we decided to ask the police to carry the body past the state Capitol building on North Capitol Street since they were leading the way. We wanted to make a statement to the world that you killed this man. James Bevel, Diane Nash, Bernard Lafayette, Hollis Watkins, Curtis Hayes, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Charlie Cobb, Dave Dennis, and several others were there. The police stopped the march at the funeral home, which infuriated us, and I said, "Oh hell no! Oh no! We're going to go past the Capitol. So I started singing "This Little Light of Mine I'm Gonna Let It Shine, all on North Capitol Street," and started running back up towards North Capitol to make a statement. We are not going to allow him to be murdered and take it as a natural death, bury him, and go about our business. *Oh, hell no! No!* Because this is an atrocity that has been perpetrated, it was terrorism, and we had to make a statement. You have to make statements. So I arrested myself that day because when we got up to North Capitol and Farish streets, they had

thrown the police barricade across and brought the dogs, so I jumped into the paddy wagon and went to jail. They got a truckload of us and took us to the fairgrounds. The fairgrounds were packed because of the demonstrations. Mr. Withers, a Memphis photographer, wanted to keep his film and I said I'd keep it. That was the day of Medgar's funeral. So I put the film in the side of my shoe and the police, one of these deputized sanitation men, said, "We want that film. We're gonna take you out one by one and whoever's got it, if you don't give it to me, when we find it, we're going to put you in the sweat box." They called Mr. Withers out and he didn't have the film. So, I said, "Well hell, I'm not going to some damn sweat box." Cause that was a torture chamber. So I took the film out, and said, "Here." The officer said, "You know what, here you are, a girl from Mississippi. I know your folks just ashamed you letting these outsiders get you in trouble. You oughta be ashamed of yourself." Then we had to stand up, with our hands up against the fairgrounds fence in 105, 106 degree heat. But then after about five minutes, "Dorie Ann Ladner. Fall out." There were two other women from Baton Rouge, they put three of us in the back of this police car and drove us over to the city jail. I said, "God, I don't want no Parchman or no County Farm because they beat Jesse Harris about to death and put him in a torture chamber when he was on the county farm. I know they beat you on the elevator. So I got upstairs, I said "How are you Jailer Miller? And he said "Hi." "How are you Captain Ray?" "Hi." So we went up to the cell block, and I'm waiting all night trying to figure out when they're coming to get me. More and more people started coming in. I said, "Oh my God." But what I didn't know is that they had had a rebellion after I was arrested.

EC: So you were already arrested by the time the rebellion started?

DL: Yeah. I was one of the first ones to be hauled off. But our position was that Medgar Evers was a man who—We had to make a statement to the world, let the world know that we were not satisfied with his death. He didn't die of old age, he didn't die from a heart attack, he didn't die from an auto accident. *He was murdered. By the state. And we wanted the world to know it.* So we raised some hell to let the world know that we were dissatisfied. That was the position. And we did raise hell. And I, right now, would feel terrible if we had just let him be buried, like he just died a natural death—

Medgar's death really devastated me. But that summer of '63, we kept going. Pete Seeger came to Mississippi, to the Delta, and we were sent to New York for a retreat and then worked in New York raising money for SNCC. We went to the March on Washington. That winter of '63 I dropped out again. I took a bus with some friends from Tougaloo to Pittsburgh and then New York, to hear a friend sing in Greenwich Village. Then I came back and started working

in Mississippi again. I dropped out a total of three times. The movement was something I wanted to do. It was pulling at me, pulling at me, so I followed my conscience.

I went to both of the trials for Byron de la Beckwith with Thomas Armstrong. At the first trial, the judge said we could sit anywhere we wanted to. We didn't have to be segregated. During the trial a white man put his foot up on the bench to stop me. I kicked his foot and told him, "The judge said we can sit wherever we want to sit, move your damn foot!" And he moved his foot. I was terrible. Beckwith would come in, prancing around like he was enjoying himself. Mrs. Evers, the widow of Medgar Evers, was called to testify during the trial. We would leave before the end in order to avoid being beaten. That ended with a hung jury and the verdict came very quickly.

The day of the second hung jury, it happened so quickly until we didn't have time to get out of the courthouse. By that time, news media from around the world was there. We would leave before the trial was over, but that day we got caught. And all the Klan was there, because they would come in and give Beckwith a standing ovation, applaud, and he would make a little speech and so forth. And Governor Ross Barnett came in, which signaled that he approved of the murder. And when the hung jury came, would you believe that Jesse Morris, a COFO worker and volunteer, drove up and said, "Do you all need a ride?" And we said, "Yes." I must say, we had so many times that divine intervention came when we weren't expecting it. But that, that's the reason we're here. Because there was no other reason. All the bombings that took place. All the people who were shot at, I mean, all those dark roads we rode and all the people who were beaten and so forth. God was with us.

In '64 we were organizing and meeting in the state. This is when we made the decision about whether whites should be a part of Freedom Summer. And so, I was part of that, and trying to pull it all together.

EC: What was your position on the Freedom Summer Project?

DL: Oh, I was for it. Because, you know as I said, growing up I'd lived in a closed society. And I felt that if people from the outside came in and brought news media and brought outside forces to look in at us, maybe word would get out about how we were living and how we were being mistreated. Cause we tried it on our own and got nowhere because of the power of the state. We were like David against Goliath. So, I was for it. And I said that when it was over Mississippi would never be the same.

EC: And that was true.

DL: That was true.

EC: Where were you during Freedom Summer?

DL: I was in Oxford [Ohio] for orientation. When I got there and saw all the volunteers, I was stunned that so many young people had made a commitment to go to Mississippi. The general impression that I got in terms of their motivation was that they wanted to bring about social and political change in the country. Some may not have been aware of the magnitude of the change or the danger that awaited them because they had never been exposed to such violence. They appeared to be very engaged, from my observations. When a church in Philadelphia was burned, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner went to check it out and Andrew Goodman got in the car at the last minute. Of course, now we know this was a set-up. But I remember going out to the blue station wagon to say bye. After we found out that they had been murdered, I decided I wanted to go to Southwest Mississippi, which had been deemed the most dangerous part of the state because of Klan activity. I wanted to go there. I didn't necessarily want to confront the Klan, but I wanted to clear some of this debris out. I saw myself as one of the forces to eradicate it. I thought it was time for them to go.

After I returned from Oxford, I went to Jackson for a week and a half to the COFO office and met volunteers and helped them get to their destinations while waiting for my assignment to Natchez. We were told that Natchez was off limits to whites because of the Klan activity. Chuck McDew, George Greene, and I went in. I saw a Watts Line report that describes our going into Natchez. We were met by Billy Bob, a cop who rode a motorcycle. He led us in and took George and Chuck to the mayor to talk to him, Mayor Nosser. I was the "undercover agent." We stayed at George Metcalfe's boarding house on St. Catherine's street and I slept in a bed with this one-eyed lady named Mary, who was just as nice as she could be. And we ate our food at White House Café, which was a local black restaurant that supported the movement.

EC: So how long did you manage to stay undercover?

DL: Not long! Guyot and I were there passing out fliers for voter registration and Citizenship classes and we got locked up for distributing leaflets without a permit. And so I called Bert, this girl from Philadelphia, and told her that we were locked up. They not only locked us up, they put sugar in the tank of the car, and they took eleven dollars I had in my wallet and a little pinhead diamond ring. We spent the whole night there, and I was very demanding and inquiring as to why I was locked up. And when I got ready to be released, they didn't give me my money or my diamond ring back. I went down there for two or three days

demanding my money and my ring. “Where in the hell is my damn money? I want my damn money and my ring!” I was very testy. The next time I went down there, there was a sign on the wall that they had scribbled, and it was right there on the wall: “Bring your baseball bat to the park, nigger’s heads will be batted in the park. Sunday.” We were not involved in any activity in the park.

EC: That’s up at the police station?

DL: The police station. They denied taking my money. They tore the motor up in the car with the sugar. We had a citizen band radio, they tore that up.

EC: Did you spend much time in jail?

DL: No, no.

EC: How did you manage to avoid that?

DL: I don’t know. I don’t know, I’m just telling you. I went to jail December ’62, that was planned. Medgar took me and Charles Bracey to picket Woolworths in December of ’62. I was arrested on the day of Medgar’s funeral. And I got arrested in Natchez for passing out those fliers.

EC: Can you tell me about going to SNCC meetings?

DL: SNCC meetings. Number one, the rule was that everyone had a voice in the movement and were allowed to express themselves. No one had the right to tell you what to say and when to say it or to shut you up. Who gave you the right to say that I don’t have the right to say what I want to say? And these marathons would go on for hours and hours and hours and hours. And Ms. Ella Baker was sitting in the back of the room, listening very carefully and observing the whole process. And here we were strutting and fretting and dancing. But she let us do all of that to develop our leadership skills, and usually it was around a plan of action. We weren’t talking just to be talking, but we were deciding on a particular project that we wanted to work on, where we wanted to work, and the strategy for it. And we came to consensus. Robert’s Rules of Order was used only sparingly. Generally everybody had their say, which was good, and consensus would rule.

EC: Do you remember some of the issues that you felt strongly about, and what your positions were?

DL: Well there was one thing that came up with the local people versus the northern people. At times, there may have been strains where some people thought that they knew more than we did and there was a little resentment. And we would come back at them with full force, cause we were from there and we knew the issues better than they did. And there were some issues around that. But, I never really wanted to talk about that. To me the larger picture was more important than locality. We would have to figure things out. If we decided that we were all going to go into Danville, Virginia, how were you going to go? Did you have enough money? Where were you going to stay and so forth and so on.

EC: I've seen a picture of you with an American flag, in Birmingham. Can you tell me about that photo?

DL: On September 15, not long after the March on Washington, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed in Birmingham. Bob Moses drove a bus of students to Birmingham and we got off at the Gaston motel, walked a little ways, and then stood across the street from the church. I don't have words to describe it. When I talked about the March on Washington, I said that "we have to go back to our communities and work." But I had no idea we were going back to *four little girls murdered in a church.* So when we went to the funeral, the funerals, it was like a daze. I just couldn't believe man's inhumanity to man. In the picture that was taken of me at the funeral, I was holding this flag, and the reason I was holding this flag was because it was a symbol of resistance because the national guard had the rebel flag sewn on their uniform. *Now* they love the American flag. And so Jeannine Herron, Ed King, Joan Trumpauer, a young Black guy who was at Tougaloo, and I were in the van with Ed going back to Tougaloo after the funeral was over. But before then, we were going to follow the cortege to the graveside until Ed and Diane Nash came running, saying, "Look, look, we can't march, they're gonna shoot us! They're gonna shoot us! They have their guns. They're gonna shoot us. We can't march. Don't march, don't march. Go, go, go!" They were literally going to shoot us out on the streets. So Joyce said, "I don't believe that!" I said, "Joyce, they had the guns trained down on us." I said, "Did you believe they would kill them in Sharpeville?"[14] And before we left, the police pulled us over and said they were gonna take us to jail because we looked like the bombers. They pulled their guns out and they were gonna lock us up. They could have held us for seventy-two hours, but Matt Herron and Thelton Henderson, the only black guy who worked for the Justice Department, came running up and wanted to know what was going on. They were able to get us released and we went back to the Gaston Motel. Joan Trumpauer said Andy Young let her sleep in his bed. I don't know whose bed I ended up sleeping in, but we got up very early the

next morning, right after dawn, and went right on back to Tougaloo. That was one of the most horrendous experiences of my life.

EC: How do you go on from that, after a bombing like that, little children?

DL: You know, I'm glad to talk about it because its something that's here. And this gives me the opportunity to talk about it. It's something so sorrowful. And Mrs. Viola Liuzzo.[15] I saw the marker for her in Alabama, where she was killed on this desolate road after the Selma march. On this dark road, poor lady, murdered. I'm glad they have a marker there for her, but it's painful. You asked me if there's anything I would do different earlier. I said, there's nothing I would do differently, I would try to do as much as I can because what I did, *hopefully*, I did some good to bring about some change. And when President Johnson signed the voting rights bill, I was in Natchez, Mississippi, and when he said, "We shall overcome," we were very cynical, like the President of the United States is saying this? We sort of laughed, hysterically.

EC: You know, one of the things I think I hear, a part of what you're talking about-- There's the pain of these tragedies, but also just how much affection you have for the people you worked with. I don't know if that's the right word.

DL: Oh, yes. Yes. A deep affection, a deep, deep affection.

EC: It seems like it's one of the things that allowed SNCC to be strong despite differences.

DL: Yeah, we bonded. That is something that kept us together because . . . Can you imagine going to sleep down there in Natchez? The phone would ring like between five-thirty and six o'clock and people went to bed early. You're holding the phone in your hand and it's still ringing. And I try to hang it up and it's still ringing. And if they don't hang theirs up, you can't get an outside connection. So we were cut off every evening. Then you go to bed thinking, "God, I hope I wake up in the morning." But the next morning, the sunshine rose. And that's the beauty of it.

EC: If you look back, who are the people that stand out in your memory as leaders or important in SNCC? And, if you could, say why.

DL: I loved Stokely's personality. I remember the first time he came to Jackson. His smile just lit up all the way across, beautiful teeth, slender body, just beautifully carved, charismatic person. Diane and Bevel because they were the

teachers, the first people that I met. And Catherine and Paul Brooks. Of course, Ms. Baker is at the top. Jim Forman, Lord.

EC: Can you tell me about Ms. Baker and your memories?

DL: You know I didn't interact that much with Ms. Baker. I sort of stared at her. It was like, I'm observing you. And she would let us rant and rave all this time. And then, maybe, twelve midnight, she would stand up and give a summation. I never held council with her, one on one, like, "Ms. Baker, what should I do with this?" I was just sort of looking at her. I had the utmost respect and admiration for her. I just saw her as someone who had so much power and knowledge that it was like, "Oh, just listen to her. She's guiding you." And she always wore these hats. And she's over there sitting, and we're over here, just dancing and carrying on. And then she would stand up and give this eloquent summation. Bob Moses would do the same thing. He had very few words and everyone would finally wait for him to speak. And when he finally spoke, that was it.

EC: What about other people? What do you remember about other people?

DL: Let's see. All my Mississippi buddies, Jesse Harris, McArthur Cotton, Hollis and Curtis, Jimmie Travis. We all started out together with Bob. And Guyot, Lawrence Guyot. Guyot used to raise so much hell on Tougaloo's campus. Oh, yeah, he was ferocious. He's brilliant. He had all that energy and so forth. And the movement filled that, all that he needed.[16]

And Mrs. Hamer didn't take any prisoners. She would stand back and talk. I mean, I feel proud in that she had the audacity to speak to Marlowe and tell him that she didn't go to register for him, she registered for herself. And she came to the church that night and told us what he said, and left her husband, because her husband had to stay there and work until they paid the bill off. And so I admired that about her, she didn't cower. Plus, she ran for Congress.

There were a lot of females in the movement. They would be at a lot of the mass meetings, involved in a lot of the activity. Now see, when the movement, when the freedom riders first came to Jackson, you had Womanpower Unlimited which was composed of local women, probably professional women, teachers and so forth.[17] And Ms. Hazel Palmer from Jackson was just unbelievable, one of the types of people who saw a need and she filled that need. She worked and worked and was diligent about it. And, Guyot and I were talking about that recently. We said, "Everybody needs a Hazel Palmer." We stayed out at Mount Beulah, it would be around '65, we were on the campus with Mrs. Hamer, Victoria Gray, Ms. Annie Devine, Unita Blackwell, a lot of us having workshops. Carl and Anne Braden came there and I remember Ms. Palmer

coming. I would think she came on her own and didn't have to be recruited. And did you ever hear about Ms. Susie Ruffin? Oh, she was something too. She was from Laurel and I mean she would be at all the meetings. She was very, very dedicated; she went to the Democratic Convention, just from the community. And you find different people like her and Miss Palmer.

EC: Can you tell me about Ms. Victoria Gray?

DL: Victoria was part of our family. My uncle married her aunt and I can remember her from a small child. And I remember her being in college. You didn't meet too many women in college, you didn't meet too many people who were in college. And she always had this ability to her. Her elocution was remarkable and she would fly on airplanes. Her husband was a soldier. In Palmer's Crossing there was an airport and she would leave out of Palmers Crossing going to Germany or wherever. And she had the most beautiful figure and would wear these high-heel shoes and so forth. I just thought she was the bomb. And she came back, after her first husband got out of the military, and she stayed in Palmers Crossing. She developed her own independent business, as a woman. She was selling beauty products and did NAACP work. She came from a family that owned so much land, so much land. They were very independent. She belonged to the Methodist Church and whatever she was a part of, you would know that she was there. She was a leader. Just remarkable! Beautiful, beautiful smile and everything. She was older than I was, but I always admired her. When she died, it was like a part of me died with her.

EC: I remember something she said that until the movement, she felt like she was always kind of a misfit, or something like that.

DL: Yeah, the movement took in a lot of people like her, and myself, and my sister. Joyce says she saw in the *New York Times* that they were advertising a party for the Mississippi expatriates. She went to the picnic and met these people who had left Mississippi years ago because they couldn't breathe and didn't have any outlet. I'm wondering how Eudora Welty and William Faulkner and Margaret Walker Alexander coped with that environment.

EC: When you look back, what are the things that seem most important to you or that stand out for you?

DL: That I did the best that I could to make a difference in the world for humanity. All humankind. And that I would do the same thing over again. And as long as I'm breathing, I will continue. I have always had fire, and always

been ready to engage in something. And its something that burns, you turn on a flame that burns for people who are being mistreated. I don't care who they are, I don't want any downtrodden person or persons to be mistreated around the globe.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Read more of Ladner's biography, see images, and watch video at her profile at the Zinn Education Project: http://zinnedproject.org/materials/ladner-dorie/.

NOTES

[1] Evers was one of the first field officers of the NAACP in Mississippi; he was murdered in June 1963 for his activism. In the 1950s, Kennard made several attempts to enroll in the segregated Missississippi Southern College (now The University of Southern Mississippi); he was ultimately denied admission, received a prison sentence based on false criminal charges (that were used to nullify his enrollment attempts), and died in July 1963 of cancer before being allowed to complete his education. Dahmer, former NAACP leader in Forrest County, MS,was killed by KKK members in a fire bomb attack of his home on 10 January 1966. He fired back to allow his family to escape, but he died the next day of smoke inhalation.

[2] Percy Dale East was the editor of *The Petal Paper*, which ran from 1953-1971. See the P.D. East Collection in the McCain Library and Archives at The University of Southern Mississippi: http://www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/archives/m324.htm.

[3] On 24 April 1959, Mack Charles Parker, a military veteran accused of raping a white woman, was taken from the jail in Poplarville, Mississippi; his body was later found in the Pearl River.

[4] Ladner is quoting from the song, "If you don't go, don't hinder me."

[5] James Meredith, an air force veteran who attended Jackson State while applying to transfer to the University of Mississippi, was older than most of the students. In fall 1962, he became the first known African American to attend "Ole Miss."

[6] The Tougaloo Nine were the first Mississippi students to conduct a sit-in, when they went to the white-only main public library in Jackson on 27 March 1961.

[7] Ladner is referring to the book written by University of Mississippi history professor James Silver, after James Meredith's desegregation of the University of Mississippi. James Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1964.

[8] Corporal Roman Duckworth was murdered by a Mississippi police officer on 9 April 1962, when he was riding a bus home to visit his family.

[9] E. H. Hurst, a member of the Mississippi legislature, murdered Herbert Lee on 25 September 1961, because he was angry about Lee's voter registration work. The sheriff convened a coroner's jury that day, which ruled that the killing was self-defense. Although Louis Allen, one of the witnesses, later told the FBI that his testimony was coerced, no further charges were brought. Instead, Allen was harassed and then murdered on 31 January 1964, the night before he planned to leave Mississippi.

[10] Ladner is using language from Booker T. Washington's famous 1895 "Atlanta Compromise" speech.

[11] Cobb was a field secretary for SNCC. Both he and McLaurin were featured guest speakers at the *Freedom Summer 1964-2014* 50th anniversary conference held at The University of Southern Mississippi, upon which this special edition of *The* Southern *Quarterly* is based.

[12] Now Wazir Peacock.

[13] Governor George Wallace tried to block the admission of Vivian Malone and James Hood on 11 June 1963. Literally standing in the "schoolhouse door," he vowed "segregation forever." This defiance was one of the things Kennedy addressed in his speech. He also announced that he was sending legislation to Congress. This was eventually passed as the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

[14] On 21 March 1960, police opened fire on an unarmed crowd of anti-pass protesters in Sharpeville, South Africa, killing sixty-nine and injuring many more.

[15] Viola Liuzzo came from Detroit to participate in the Selma to Montgomery March and was murdered by Klansman on 25 March 1965 while driving through Lowndes County, Alabama.

[16] Lawrence Guyot, a stalwart in the Mississippi Movement and eventual head of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, passed away on 23 November 2012.

[17] For more on Womanpower Unlimited, see Tiyi M. Morris, *Womanpower Unlimited and the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2014.