

Interview with **Rachel West Nelson**

December 6, 1985

Production Team: C

Camera Rolls: 579-581

Sound Rolls: 1535

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 579]

[sound roll 1535]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: JUST HOLD THAT LIGHT UP. THERE YOU GO.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: GREAT. CALLIE, IT'S ALL YOURS. WE'RE ALL SET.

INTERVIEWER: OK. RACHEL, YOU WERE NINE YEARS OLD IN 1965. HOW DOES A NINE-YEAR- OLD GET INVOLVED IN THE VOTING RIGHTS CAMPAIGN?

Nelson: Well, mostly we have our parents to depend on, plus we had many great leaders to help us to understand the meaning of voting rights. My father was one of the great participant of the voting rights. He went out door to door trying to get black people to vote. He also was called the black captain so, because all of his help he tried to influence many people. Also there was Dr. King who mostly led me and Sheyann to understanding what it was for black people to get the right to vote. Yes, I was nine. I didn't understand, but like I said we had many people we can depend on. We had our teachers, we had preachers, I had my uncle, my cousins, who—whoever.

00:01:20:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, TELL ME ABOUT JANUARY 2<sup>nd</sup> THAT WAS THE FIRST BIG

MEETING HERE IN BROWN CHAPEL AND SHEYANN TELLS ME ABOUT HOW YOU ALL SAW PEOPLE OUTSIDE AND CAME BACK. TELL ME THE STORY OF THAT.

Nelson: OK. Of course, Sheyann, she was—she went to Clark School. I was going to Catholic school which was about three blocks away. Sheyann and I would walk to school together, at least, I would walk her as far as Clark School. Clark School is right across the street from Brown Chapel. We noticed some people was mingling around Brown Chapel and we was wondering what was going on. I had to go on to school. Sheyann, she stayed to find out what was really happening and she did. And that evening when I got home from school, she told me that they was planning a big march to give black people the right to vote. So from that point on we became very involved. We—Sheyann and myself, we led freedom songs. We always greeted Dr. King when he came into the church. We would get up from in the front go to the back when Dr. King would enter to just to sit in his lap and listen to his main question he would ask us, and that was, what do you want? And we would reply, freedom. He would always say, I can't hear you. What do you want? And we would respond in a louder tone of voice, we would say, freedom and justice for all.

00:02:54:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Nelson: After that, we would come back and we would march along with the other people.

INTERVIEWER: OOPS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: EXCUSE ME, WE JUST RAN OUT.

00:03:05:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 580]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FLAGS.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK, CALLIE, IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: OK, YOU WERE TELLING ME ABOUT GREETING DR. KING. YOU—DO YOU WANT TO—YOU REALLY WANNA TELL ME ABOUT THAT AGAIN? YOU CAN IF YOU WANT TO. IF YOU FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE.

Nelson: Well, it's all right. OK. [laughs] What was I saying? Oh, Sheyann and I used to go to the back of the church just to be the first one to greet Dr. Martin Luther King. Dr. King would always sit Sheyann and me on his lap and ask us what we would want and what did we want. And we would reply, freedom. We would say it in such a low tone, he want us to speak up and mean what we said. He would say, what do you want? And we would reply, freedom and justice for all. And he would always say that is the way I want to hear it. Because black people need to be free. We are not free until we set ourselves free.

00:04:17:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW WHAT ABOUT THESE FREEDOM SONGS YOU WERE TELLING ME THAT YOU ALL SANG? I'VE BEEN HEARING ABOUT 'EM AND—

Nelson: OK.

INTERVIEWER —CAN YOU SING A LITTLE BIT OF ONE OF THEM FOR ME, COME ON NOW [laughs]. YOU KNOW HOW TO SING.

Nelson: OK, there was many freedom songs we used to sing. Freedom song, at this particular time, meant a whole lot. It was something like, you know, singing a song to carry out a message. Like we was trying to let the people know that we mean—we meant something by these songs. It was great determination and dignity. Freedom—

INTERVIEWER: COME ON. GIVE ME ONE.

Nelson: —[laughs] songs always seems like it just touches people, you know, because they— it, it was so much—just some like spiritual songs, you know. I'd say the main song we used to sing was “Come by Here Lord, Come by Here.” And this is where we get the title from “Selma Lord, Selma” from this particular freedom song. And we was asking the Lord to please help Selma, “Selma Lord, Selma.” The song goes like this: [laughs] [sings] “Come by here my Lord, Come by here. Come by here my Lord, come by here. Come by here my Lord, come by here. Oh Lord, come by here. Selma needs you Lord, come by here. Selma needs you Lord, come by here. Selma needs you Lord, come by here. Oh, Lord, come by here.” [talking] At this particular time, Selma did need the Lord [laughs].

00:06:08:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME ASK YOU ABOUT THE FIRST TIME YOU SAW MARTIN LUTHER KING—THAT WAS GREAT. [laughs] IT WAS WONDERFUL. JUST BECAUSE WE DON'T REACT DOES NOT MEAN THAT WE DON'T THINK IT'S GREAT. WE'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO TALK.

Nelson: [laughs] OK.

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME ABOUT THE FIRST TIME YOU SAW MARTIN LUTHER KING, WAS IT, WAS IT MAGICAL? WAS IT SPECIAL? THE VERY FIRST TIME YOU WERE NINE YEARS OLD AND YOU SEE THIS MAN.

Nelson: Oh, yes, because all the people was gathering and it was all whispering saying, this great man coming to set the black people free. To help them get the right to vote, equality, and justice. Equality and justice for all men. And Sheyann and myself were just wondering, who is this great man? Matter of fact, we used to see him on television, hear him on radios, and, finally, we was getting to meet this particular man. When Dr. King came to the Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church, it was just like, oh, like the Lord has come. He was a man of great dignity and pride. He was a man of great admiration. A man in which all people believe in and love. Dr. King overcome [sic] all of this for black people. I don't think—I think without, Dr. King power and concern for black people, I don't think we would have overcome. Back then, my parents, they couldn't vote. Matter of fact no black people could vote. Black people could not go into no public places. We could not go into theatres, movies, libraries. We could not even use the water fountain of our choice. We could not go into the Courthouse. Just imagine not being able, I mean, just free to do these things. ***If you can't vote, you ain't free; and if you ain't free, well then, you're slave.*** So, therefore, we were slave. We didn't have our freedom.

00:08:20:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME ASK YOU SOMETHING. PRETEND THAT I'VE NEVER SEEN A PICTURE OF DR. KING AND DESCRIBE HIM FOR ME THE WAY YOU SAW HIM THEN. YOU KNOW, LIKE WHAT DID HE LOOK LIKE? YOU KNOW, SHORT, TALL, BIG, WHATEVER. HOWEVER, HE LOOKED LIKE TO YOU AT THAT TIME.

Nelson: Dr. King was a man with a deep voice. When he spoke it touches you. Everything he said had a meaning to it. Dr. King, he was a dark complexioned man, black is beautiful, he was black. He was medium height, kinky hair, [laughs] oh God, he—

INTERVIEWER: DID HE LOOK—

Nelson: —beautiful eyes. He always wore a suit when he presented himself to come here to speak. He always had on his marching shoes. Dr. King was a man I could never forget. He is a man I will always remember, even today, as we sit here in Brown Chapel Church, I can remember him standing up there speaking, telling each and every one of us, one day children we'll walk together, both black and white, and say, free at last, free at last. Thank God almighty, we're free at last.

00:10:05:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME ASK YOU ABOUT YOUR HOUSE. YOU'RE PARENTS UNLIKE SHEYANN'S PARENTS WERE VERY MUCH INVOLVED AND A LOT OF

PEOPLE STAYED AT YOUR HOUSE.

Nelson: Right.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT—CAN YOU TELL ME THE STORIES OF THE PEOPLE STAYING THERE?

Nelson: Oh, yes. One morning I woke up and it was many people there, both black and white. People were sleeping on the floors behind the couches. Anywhere they can get. It was an enjoyable time. It's—it was a good experience for me, you know. It was eleven of us and we lived in a five bedroom apartment right next to the church. My father was the first to take in shelter for the civil rights workers. Our home was called the second freedom house. We, my parents, I did, we influenced other project people to take in these people.

00:11:10:00

INTEVIEWER: THAT WOULD BE THE FIRST TIME THAT A LOT OF WHITE PEOPLE HAD STAYED AT YOUR HOUSE THEN.

Nelson: Right, right. That's the first time white people stayed at my house, yes, indeed. And, you know, of course, I was wondering what was going on. [laughs] But like I said, we had—there was Jonathan Daniels, there was James Bevel, Hosea Williams, John Lewis, Stokely Carmichael, Dick, Dick Gregory, Ralph Abernathy, all these people stayed with us, just to name a few. There was many of them. Jonathan Daniels, he helped with the voter registration drive. He was killed. Shot down in Haynesville, Alabama. Jonathan Daniels had a lot of influence on black people. He—I could recall the times when he used to just sit down and talk to Sheyann and myself, play games, we prayed together, we ate together, we walk and talk together. Not only naming Jonathan Daniels, but there were many, many other leaders. I could recall this particular person, Frank Sirocco, Sirocco. He was one of the many leaders—white—he was one of the first four white leaders that came down to help support this drive. I could recall, Bloody Sunday, the postman—they was trying to track him down. At this particular time, I was headed back toward the housing project to my apartment and Frank, he grabbed me with one arm, carried me straight up to the stairs of my mother's apartment where the postman was after him trying to kill him. I turned around and noticed that there was a state trooper on a horse running right, right after me. And if this particular man hadn't grabbed me, I think, I wouldn't be here today. So, it's just, you know, it just something I can just never forget.

INTERVIEWER: I WANT TO ASK YOU ABOUT ANOTHER TIME, THE DAY OF THE TEACHERS MARCH.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I THINK YOU'D BETTER LEAVE THAT.

INTERVIEWER: NO—OK.

[cut]

00:13:41:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 581]

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S TO KEEP US ALL AWAKE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND FLAGS.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ALL RIGHTY.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: IT'S HOT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: IT'S ALL SET, CALLIE.

INTERVIEWER: OK. TELL ME ABOUT THE DAY THE TEACHERS MARCH; WHAT, WHAT IMPRESSED YOU MOST ABOUT THAT?

Nelson: Oh, well, just to see the teachers participating in the marches. Simply because back in the '60s the teachers would not march. We gave them a name. We called them Uncle Toms. [laughs] And Reverend F. D. Reese led about an hundred and twenty-five teachers from Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church to the Dallas County Courthouse. The teachers influence a lot of other teachers, a lot of other people. Mainly they influenced the students. We had a lot children marching, also, *and it was teachers, then, was somewhat like up in the upper class, you know? People looked up to teachers then and looked up to preachers. They were somewhat like leaders for us back then*, but once they got out, seems like more black people start, you know, taking part in the movement.

INTERVIEWER: WHEN YOU SAW THEM COMING DOWN THE STREET WHAT DID YOU THINK?

Nelson: Well, I guess, they was tired of being called Uncle Toms, because it, it just seems that a way, just—that, that is the way, that's the way they were. You know, we out trying to get the black people the right to vote and they, I guess, the main thing they was concerned about was losing their jobs. Most of them was afraid of losing their jobs. Mainly they was just afraid. You know, simply because of the riots and what may break out and everything. So it was good to see them once participate in the marches.

00:15:44:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, YOU KNOW, THAT THAT WAS A REAL DANGEROUS TIME THEN JUST—DURING THE WHOLE VOTING RIGHTS CAMPAIGN. PEOPLE

GETTING BEATEN ALL THE TIME, FEW PEOPLE GETTING KILLED. WERE, WERE YOU SCARED?

Nelson: Of course. Sometimes, I was and sometime I wasn't. I felt—

INTERVIEWER: LET ME STOP YOU. START YOU AGAIN AND ASK YOU TO JUST TELL ME, BECAUSE PEOPLE WON'T HEAR MY VOICE. JUST SAY, NO YES, I WAS SCARED OR WHATEVER. JUST PUT IT IN THE SENTENCE FOR ME, SO—

Nelson: OK.

INTERVIEWER: SO OTHER PEOPLE WILL UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT.

Nelson: OK.

INTERVIEWER: SO, WERE YOU SCARED?

Nelson: Yes, I was afraid. Sometimes I was and sometime I wasn't. Because this particular time Dr. King always led peaceful nonviolent marches. This is the main reason why I wasn't afraid until Bloody Sunday, yes indeed. I was afraid. My parents was afraid, peop—black people, people in general was afraid. There was gossip about there was gonna be a riot break out. There was gonna be tear gas, billy-clubs, people was gonna get killed or what have you. My parents told me not to march. Although my father, he participated in it. My father was sprayed with tear gas, he was beaten with billy clubs. *Sheyann and I went to the Edmund Pettus Bridge. There where I turned around and left Sheyann, simply because, I'm telling you, I, I was afraid.* I was on my way back when I turned around and heard all the yelling and screaming. People running and shouting. People was hollering, tear gas, run. Run for your life. People are being killed. And this was the time when I was almost ran over by this postman. And this was the time when Frank Sirocco picked me up and carried me to the house. John Lewis, Hosea Williams, Albert Turner, these was just some of them who was beaten. [pause] Go ahead. I'm trying to think—

INTERVIEWER: AND, AND I JUST WANT TO GET BACK TO YOUR FEAR OF WHAT WAS, WHAT WAS HAPPENING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK. WE CHANGE C—SOUND ROLLS.

INTERVIEWER: OH, OK.

[cut]

00:18:11:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS. SPEED RIGHT IN THE—SMACK IN THE MIDDLE HERE. GO AHEAD.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: EXCUSE ME.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: IT'S HOT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK, CALLIE, IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: OK. I WANNA TALK TO YOU BACK BEFORE THE MOVEMENT PEOPLE CAME AND THE ACT—MOVEMENT PEOPLE—THE ACTIVITIES STARTED. I CAN'T GET MY QUESTION RIGHT. WHAT WAS IT LIKE JUST TO BE A KID HERE IN SELMA? WAS IT FUN OR WHAT WAS IT LIKE?

Nelson: What was it like being a kid? Well—

INTERVIEWER: IN SELMA. START THAT AGAIN AND TELL ME IN SELMA [laughs].

Nelson: [laughs] What was it like being a kid?

INTERVIEWER: IN SELMA.

Nelson: What was it like being a kid in Selma? In Selma, in the 1960, being a kid, I would say, well, back then they treated you just like you were adults, simply because my sister, who was twelve at the time, was put into a sweatbox. My two older sisters was, was thrown in jail. Even myself, I was almost ran over. When we used to march, they wouldn't take the smallest kids in, but some they would. Seems like to me they was going by their heights or—

INTERVIEWER: I'M GONNA INTERRUPT YOU, 'CAUSE I WANT YOU TO TELL ME BEFORE THE MOVEMENT.

Nelson: Oh, before, oh OK.

INTERVIEWER: BEFORE THE MOVEMENT, WHAT WAS IT LIKE BEING A KID IN SELMA?

Nelson: OK. [laughs] Before the movement, being a kid in Selma was nice. It was fun, but like I said we didn't—we couldn't go into places, puppet places. If I needed to go to the dentist, I could not go. My parents couldn't take me. If I needed to go to a doctor, my parents couldn't take me. If we went, we had to go to the back door. We couldn't go to the schools of our choice. Children in Selma, well, it's just like it was for our parents. We wasn't free, but it was good to live here in Selma.

00:20:37:00



INTERVIEWER: WHAT IF THERE HAD BEEN NO MOVEMENT?

Nelson: If there hadn't been no movement, we wouldn't have been free. To me, I was going to a Catholic school, going to a Catholic school at this time was great. We had white nun teachers, but the movement made everything possible for better life for all people in Selma. It could be better. It's much more need to be done, but yet there still, I feel, personally, my feelings is, my parents are free. When they are free, I feel I am free. Therefore, the movement made a better life.

INTERVIEWER: THAT IS IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: GOOD.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:21:51:00

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