Interview with **William Rutherford**
Date: November 22, 1988
Interviewer: Paul Stekler
Camera Rolls: 4062-4067
Sound Rolls: 426-427
Team: D

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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 II*.

[camera roll #4062]
[sound roll #426]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:00:16:00

Interviewer:

What was your position in SCLC? What did Dr. King have in mind when he brought you in? What'd he want you to do?

00:00:22:00

William Rutherford:

Well, my job in SCLC essentially was to serve as a manager in mounting, developing, and installing certain management systems that hadn't existed before. And when Dr. King asked me to come, it was essentially to fill a gap that they had begun to feel more and more strongly, where they had this really mass movement of people interested in social change and in seeing civil rights advanced in America, but who essentially were not organization people

or were not accustomed to functioning in terms of organizations. And I remember when I first spoke to him about it. I originally came to SCLC not to serve in the organization but to serve as a representative of the organization in Europe. And I came over essentially to attend the first annual, or the first for me, the first annual meeting of the Board of Direction…Board of Directors, sorry, and become acquainted with them and with the organization's program and so on. And then to return to Europe where I was living and working at the time, to set up something called "Friends of Martin Luther King" in Europe. This would have grouped several Nobel Prize winners in various areas – Italy, Holland, Sweden, I think, we had representatives. And to serve as a locus for fund-raising in Europe and also as a source of information. In those days, there was virtually no information about Black America being diffused or actually available in Europe at all, that was going to be my role and function. But when I came to America, essentially for a two week period to do this in 1966, I walked into the office on Auburn Avenue, and it was filled with enthusiastic, busy, involved people, wandering here and there. Some saying hello, some trying to work, but a total, total chaos and cacophony, if you would. And I looked around and it was just unbelievable. And in one of my first meetings with Dr. King he explained to me that they were coming up on the tenth anniversary of the founding of SCLC. This was approximately in June/July and I think the anniversary was to have been in August/September, and he explained to me that unfortunately there was not sufficient time to produce a brochure or booklet or some kind of commemorative publication for their tenth anniversary. And having been a journalist myself, having worked for many years in publications and in publishing and so on, I was astounded that, the idea that they couldn't produce a document, a publication in two months. So, I said to Dr. King, Well, perhaps I can be of some help on this, and let me see what I can do. So, I went and I called one of my oldest friends in America, Milton Moskovitz, who was in charge of one of the external affairs departments at J. Walter Thompson in New York. I said, Listen, Milt. What do you think we could do about producing a booklet on SCL – ten years of SCLC? He said, Well, why don't you gather whatever materials and pictures you've got and come up here? And sure enough, I rattled through the files and the archives at SCLC and so on, gathered up a couple of suitcases of documents, and flew up to New York and we did it in five days.

00:03:58:00

Interviewer:

You told me something wonderful though, in terms of what your first impression was, when you walked into the office at the SCLC Auburn Avenue headquarters, in terms of the collection of people there? What did you find?

00:04:11:00

William Rutherford:

Mmm, my first impressions of SCLC, I didn't believe it. It was an unbelievable collection of rich, poor, well-clad, poorly-clad people, articulate people, busy people, loafing people, visiting people, people from all walks of life, Black, White, farmers, businessmen, people

really coming to bring things. I mean, everything from food, I won't say chickens, but I really would say dishes of food, bread, and so on, that they would share with the staff that was there. The staff, I would say, ranged from unemployed sharecroppers to—through students, religious people—to very sophisticated business people who would come in to see how they could contribute and participate. And of course, this lack of order and organization was what made it a grassroots movement that spread across the total spectrum of American society and life. It gave it its strength and its impetus, but then that became self-defeating at some point. And I believe this is where Dr. King decided, and it had been discussed sometime, of course, earlier that the organ—the movement needed to become more organized. And that's essentially what I was asked to do. And after being there, as I said, really for an orientation session, and getting involved in actual working there, and having no friends, I only knew two people when I actually arrived in Atlanta: Dr. King himself and Andy Young, and Mrs. King. I had met the three of them in Geneva a year earlier, having, as I say, having no other contacts or relations there, I really spent my time in the office after hours and on and on and on. And at some point, Dr. King said to me very, very nicely, Well, Bill, having you here has made a terrific difference and it really would be very nice if you could come back and stay for a longer time.

00:06:09:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:06:14:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:06:15:00

Interviewer:

There was much debate over the Poor People Campaign idea with SCLC.

William Rutherford:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

When the Poor People's Campaign was first proposed, did many SCLC staff people jump to agree with Dr. King?

00:06:30:00

William Rutherford:

When the Poor People's Campaign was first proposed, I'd say that almost no one on the staff was really enthusiastic about the idea, let alone the problems and process of organizing a mass demonstration around the poor. The genesis of the Poor People's Campaign, I'd say was really in Dr. King's thinking and the evolution of his thinking. And you must remember that at the time, SCLC had achieved considerable success in a number of areas and if the staff were basically indifferent to, I'd say indifferent to, rather than opposed to an effort in that direction, it was based on the history of the movement until that point. If you remember, there was the whole area of public accommodations. This was certainly one of the greatest achievements in the history of race relations in the United States. When they, actually for the first time in the history of the country, opened up all public facilities to all Americans. There was similarly a very strong move, organization within the movement for voter registration. You remember that in 1964, they'd passed the Voting Rights Act and we had a division. It was supported by various foundations and by the public around the country to register people to vote. So, this was a very important activity. So, citizenship training to teach people, many people who'd never had the opportunity to vote, didn't really understand the importance of voting, or didn't really care about voting. So, we had what we called a Citizen Educa—Citizen Education and Voter's Right Department that was headed by Dorothy Cotton, and that's what she worked on basically. The other really important element within SCLC at the time was what we called our Affiliates Division. You know, SCLC was a grouping of organizations, grass root organizations basically, clergymen throughout the United States, basically in the South but throughout the country. So, people were very actively organizing these local affiliates to work in their communities on public accommodations and voting registration drives and so on. And similarly, we had begun the Bread Basket Movement which originated in Atlanta with two Black clergymen in Atlanta and so on. So, the staff was really quite busy and quite involved in things when Dr. King looked up, and in his reasoning—and I'm paraphrasing of course—he said, Fine. We now have the right to vote. Fine. We can now go to any restaurant, any hotel, any place we want to in America but we don't have the means. So, what good does it do to people to go to any restaurant in the world if you don't have the money to pay for a meal? So, he says, We've got to attack the whole issue of poverty and economic deprivation. And that was his thinking, his reasoning for pushing for a Poor People's Campaign. But of course, when this has to impact on people that have been fighting to get people registered and into polling places, people who have been fighting to get education, people who have been fighting for the right to go into public accommodations, the idea of attacking something as vast and as amorphous as poverty, of course, wasn't very appealing. So, I'd say that basically almost no one on the staff thought

that the next priority, the next major movement, should be focused on poor people or the question of poverty in America.

00:10:16:00

Interviewer:

What were the debates like? What wha-what was the discussion like?

00:10:19:00

William Rutherford:

Oh, I think there was a great deal and, I have to prefathis—preface this by saying that many of our senior staff were clergymen, meaning that they are very good talkers, they like to talk, they're trained speakers, they're trained rhetoricians. And being very strong-willed and strong-minded, or they wouldn't have been in the movement in the first place, or they wouldn't have survived in it, they were all very strong personalities and characters. So, each one would have his point to make. Each one would speak to his point, and at great length, and with great eloquence. And these meetings could go on for hours, and being, again, basically very creative, independent people, they were very difficult to discipline. And my role, or part of my role as an outsider, was to attempt to put some organization in this very volatile, spontaneous situation. So, we made it very—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

William Rutherford:

—clear who was in charge. Dr. King had made it very clear who was in charge. I trai—pardon?

00:11:21:00

Interviewer:

We just ran out of film.

Camera Crew Member #2:

It's a rollout on—

00:11:23:00

William Rutherford:

OK, I said I chaired these meetings and that's when I got in the process of saying, Well, each one get ten minutes, otherwise we'll be here all night.

Camera Crew Member #2:

—rollout on 4062.

[cut]

[camera roll #4063]

00:11:32:00

Interviewer:

Mr. Rutherford, do you wanna say something—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Camera roll 4063.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:11:38:00

William Rutherford:

No, the SCLC staff was a collection of great individuals and individualists. Very independent, as I said, and very articulate and each with a mind of his own, which allowed him, one, to join the movement, and two, survive internal, external pressures. But being very individualistic and independent, they're a hard lot to control. And I'd say that practically, practically no one could do that except Dr. King. All of that, of course, compounded by the fact that everyone was a volunteer, come or go, so who's going to give or take orders? And of course, a part of my role was to attempt to instill some discipline or at least some order, and it wasn't easy, as you can imagine, having such a collection of really high-powered, active, hyperactive, articulate, motivated, dedicated people to try and control as a staff. Imagine Jose, Andy, Jesse, Fauntroy, just a collection, T.Y. Rogers, others that you've forgotten by now. T.Y. Rogers being the head of our Affiliates Division, we called him the "Tiger of Tuscaloosa." And he was one of these Southern preachers who could mesmerize you, he could hypnotize, you know, masses of people, and did. But when this same process was being applied on one another, our meetings could go on for hours and Dr. King was the soul

of patience, and he would listen and listen and listen, and rarely interrupt. He would hear everyone out, then he'd say, Well, this is very interesting but what I think is, then he would summarize, in about twenty minutes, four hours of previous discussion. Now, in attempting to organize, at least to moderate somewhat, this outpouring of energy and enthusiasm, and many, many very, very good ideas that were, you know, some practical and some not practical, I did a number of things. I'll never forget going, at some point, we'd say, Each one has ten minutes. You'd take off your watch and you'd put it on the table in front of you, and you'd try to each one to go for ten minutes. But how do you stop someone in their mid-oration, the middle of their peroration, to stop and say, Well, it's, your ten minutes are up, and so on? So, I went by Sears and Roebuck one day on the way to the office, and for a few dollars I got a kitchen timer, and I'd put it on the table, and of course, then Jose would take off or Jesse would take off or Andy would take off. All of a sudden, you'd hear that little ping. What? You mean that's ten minutes already? Of course, it was ten minutes, probably, you know, a minute more or so. But other things, like sometimes people would show up for meetings and sometimes they wouldn't, these very independent, individualistic people. So, I began, again, something that might sound a little Boy Scout-ish now, but it was necessary, and I'm happy to say it also worked. I would impose a fine of twenty-five dollars for someone who came to a meeting late. I would oppo—impose a fine of fifty dollars for someone who didn't show up at all. And this was particularly true of one of our staff members who was located in Chicago, he was so independent he would come or not come as it suited him, and we'd be hopping mad because we'd sit there. We'd have maybe Stan Levison, who would fly in from New York, spend the night, talk to Dr. King, stick around for the staff meeting the next morning, and the meeting would start an hour late, so you had to put an end to that. So, we tried all kinds of things. And so at some point, I read off these new rules and regulations, From now on, here's the way it's gonna be. Following week, everybody showed up, including our contingent from Chicago and so on. The meeting still started half an hour late. You know who the first person was that we stuck? You'll never guess, it was Dr. King – twenty-five dollars it cost him. And this, of course, is a staff that has very little income of any kind, certainly not from the organization. But we were going to then use that fund for a recreation fund and, you know, all go on a picnic or something with those funds at some point. But that was our effort to put some discipline into the meetings of the staff.

00:15:51:00

Interviewer:

You'd have all this talk, and at the end, Dr. King would sum up. Did that mean that everybody would agree with him?

00:15:57:00

William Rutherford:

I don't know if everyone would agree with him. No, everyone didn't agree with Dr. King, but no one ever really, how should I say, left the meeting opposed to what he had said. There was very little carryover. He would not impose a consensus but he was able, his thinking and his

thoughts were so clear, he was able to cut through three or four hours of rhetoric and discussion and simply say, Well, this makes sense, that makes sense. A good point made an hour and a half ago by Al Sampson, or whoever it might be, And that, but I would have this to say about that, and he would go on, and within fifteen or twenty minutes, he would have, everyone would have expressed his or herself, and he would be able to synthesize the whole thinking, so that he had probably taken in the best elements that this, you know, really rather heteroclitic crowd had been able to enunciate during that, that period.

00:17:00:00

Interviewer:

Do you think people that disagreed with him would think that it made sense?

00:17:03:00

William Rutherford:

Well, people who began disagreeing with him would end up saying, Well, that's probably out of this mass of ideas and proposals being put forward, that is probably the best synthesis that anyone could make. So, yes, in that sense, we did all end up in his corner. Even if we had, you know, differing ideas at the outset, and maybe the next day in fact. Then you had to come back and convince Dr. King. What was marvelous about him is that since he would hear you out, everyone was able to express themselves and so on. He really never sat on anyone, you really couldn't say that you didn't have a chance to, you know, articulate or enunciate your ideas. He heard you out and then he said, OK that sounds great but here's what we're going to do. And then he'd, but he sort of, you know, that was the word from the man. In a very comradely fashion, he really never gave orders, he never dictated. He was a very strong leader but his leadership, I think, came from both the moral force within him and his intellectual powers of really of imposing on a number of very talented, strong personalities and intellects that surrounded him.

00:18:13:00

Interviewer:

Cut. That was very nice.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed. Mark it.

[slate]

William Rutherford:

Yes, well—

00:18:20:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Just a second. OK.

00:18:22:00

Interviewer:

How did you organize? What was the grassroots organization like for the PPC?

00:18:28

William Rutherford:

Oh, ***we organized the Poor People's Campaign by putting out what is known in the movement as "a call." A call to worship, a call to participate, a call for camaraderie, and so on. Whoever hears your call will respond.*** It's a kind of unspoken bond of friendship and camaraderie and so on. ***When I call you, it means I need you and you will come.*** If you put out a call and I hear you I will come. That in the movement was "the call." So, the decision was taken, and there'd been a number of meetings with Dr. King's closest advisers in the trade union movement, amongst the clergy, the World Council of Churches, and so on, about focusing on the issue of poverty in America. There was this famous book by Harrington, *The Other America*, that dealt with the problem of hunger. Dr. King saw that a ca— copy of that circulated amongst the staff and others and so on and so forth. So, the call was issued and people arrived in Atlanta from every part of America— north, south, east, west, and so on— and they arrived to participate and to work, to discuss but then to go out and to assist in organizing this newest and most important of SCLC's campaigns. And I remember there were some three hundred people who gathered in Ebenezer Church to discuss the logistics, the arrangements, the plan, and we had worked on those for weeks and weeks now, and we were going to give the word to those who'd responded to our appeal or to our call. They'd really gathered, as I said, from Texas, from California, from Detroit, from Chicago, from New York, from you name it, Mississippi, Alabama, all of the surrounding states, of course. People had come in who had participated in previous drives, previous demonstrations, previous campaigns, and so on, that were all answering the call. And as I said, we all gathered at the church to hear the leader speak, give us the direction, then to discuss the details and so on. And we had a very, very large number of persons, and we had chosen some that were known before, and we would organize and dispatch teams, generally of two persons per location. For example, we took two experienced civil rights participants, or leaders, or workers, whatever you want to call them, to organize Manhattan. In principal, we had no money, we had a war chest that was very limited. The organization was indebted at the time

and I think we had allocated something like fifty dollars per week for each participant. That fifty dollars was to pay for everything: food, board, lodging, clothing, transportation, incidentals, and so on. And for campaign expenses, we allocated the princely sum of twenty-five dollars, anything beyond that they had to raise locally. So, we sent the team to California. We sent the team to Chicago, Al Sampson being a half of our Chicago team. We sent two men to organize Chicago and we sent two men to organize New York City. And of course, they were to call upon the local clergy, the local SCLC affiliate, the local communities, and so on, for the resources necessary to organize the campaign in that locality. And by and large they did. And I must say they also were to see about fund-raising in each. Their mandate was to respond to the total needs of the Poor People's Campaign in terms of organization and participation, recruitment of persons, identification of persons, publicity, information, and so on and so forth, through the schools, through the churches, through other community organizations and so on. And the whole logistical problem was that we could only ensure, I'd say, two months' budget at the time we were sending this team into the field, but we had literally three hundred—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

William Rutherford:

—people, as I said, a very mixed group.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

00:22:44:00

Interviewer:

I wanna hold this for a second. I wanna step right into that point.

William Rutherford:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, that's a rollout on 4063.

Interviewer:

I think what I'd like to—

William Rutherford:

I'm glad, Paul. I know you put many, many hours, many, many days, to this effort.

[cut]

[camera roll #4064]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll 4064.

William Rutherford:

Mmm, and nights. Yeah, yeah. Late nights.

00:23:00:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:23:02:00

Interviewer:

Can you sum up by talking about the three hundred people that went out, the amount of people that you'd sent to New York City to organize the whole thing and how this was to organize America?

00:23:12:00

William Rutherford:

Yes. Well, we had, as I said, fewer than three hundred persons, hands, I'd say, to organize America. We were asking three hundred persons to organize two hundred million people. And of course, to a large degree, they did. We had a movement that began in the northeastern United States that I think brought a caravan of some one hundred-and-some buses of people from the northeastern United States across the northeast into Washington. We had support from artists, I mean, the Pete Seivers [sic], the Marlon Brandos. Many, many people in many areas, in many walks of life, from the trade unions to prominent Hollywood figures. I mean, the Burt Lancasters and so on, that participated and would donate, say, a bus. No great, you know, shakes for them, but tremendous for us. And these three hundred people did go out to organize America. And I will never forget going out to Albuquerque. We were having

difficulty with the organization, the logistics of the local group that were going to come from the southwest to participate in the Poor People's Campaign. And I met Brando in Albuquerque, he came down because he was going to buy ten buses, he was going to donate ten buses, say. And to be sure that these buses were going to leave, as he said on the—he'd said to me on the telephone, Well, listen, man, no fooling around. He said, If these are gonna, this money's gonna go for buses, I wanna be sure that it goes to buses and that the buses leave. I said, Easy. I said, We're going to have a rally there and you're the perfect person to participate, I'll see you in Albuquerque. And sure enough, he came to Albuquerque—blue jeans, whole thing—and we went to a local stadium, held a rally, ninety percent Chicano, but with Anglos and Blacks that were there in the audience as well. And he spoke and he was, he speaks very briefly, very much to the point. It was a very staccato kind of presentation that he makes. And as we left, people were coming by, and there were ladies who were dropping their wedding bands into the kitty. And he was so embarrassed, he stormed out of that stadium, and I was right behind him saying, Hang on, Marlon. Hang on, we'll give the rings back, we'll give the rings back, and so on. But that was the kind of enthusiasm, of course, that Dr. King and the movement and all of its participants were able to generate throughout the country.

00:25:43:00

Interviewer:

And tell me about New York City. What did you do and who were you sending?

00:25:46:00

William Rutherford:

Well, New York City, into New York City, we sent Reverend Kirkpatrick, who was a well-known minister from Texas, a rural minister from rural Texas. We sent James Collier, who had been around the map and had participated in a number of earlier demonstrations in Chicago and Selma and so on. And these were the two men who were assigned, with their fifty dollars, to go and organize New York City. And of course, once they were there, they had resources, they had friends in the artistic community, in the academic community, in the religious community, community, and so on and so forth. And they did everything, from organizing meetings in churches in the evening to speak about Poor People's Campaign, about the Poor People's Campaign, and to invite people to participate. So, they were recruiting at the same time and at every possible level.

00:26:38:00

Interviewer:

And that's how you were, that's how you organized America?

00:26:40:00

William Rutherford:

That's how, by and large, we organized America. It was not publicity, it was not advertising, it was not newspaper or television publicity, and so on. It was people to people, and person to person, and those were the people who decided it was time to do something about poverty in America.

00:26:59:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Change it.

Interviewer:

That's great.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Oh, sec sticks.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Second sticks!

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:27:07:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:27:08:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about the trips that you and Bernard Lafayette took to talk to more militant Black groups.

00:27:14:00

William Rutherford:

Well, Bernard and I made several trips and, for a number of reasons, I'd say. Not only to recruit people for the Poor People's Campaign and to participate in the campaign and to support the campaign, but also not to interfere with the Poor People's Campaign. We sought the widest possible constituency. We sought not only the participation of majority America and Black America. We sought all of those that we thought had common interest and would make common cause with us. So, we sent out another call from SCLC to related groups. We sent out a call to the Hispanic groups. We sent out a call to the Appalachian poor White groups. We sent out a call to the American Indian groups. And we invited them to come and sit with us in the councils and to participate in the discussion, the reasoning, the strategy, and so on. And this had happened earlier, where you'd had small groups of these other, as you say, ethnic constituencies and so on that that had participated in SCLC organized civil rights drives and so on, but for the Poor Peop…Poor People's Campaign, again, we thought we'd have a token representation. And again, we put out the call expecting perhaps fifty people, and we ended up with perhaps a hundred and fifty that came from north, south, east, and west again. We were expecting one or two American, Native American groups to participate, and we had maybe ten. We expected one or two Hispanic groups to participate, and we had all of the mainline Hispanic groups in America at the time. We expected some of the tenants' rights groups in Chicago, which is an essentially, all-White poor peoples' group in Chicago. They came, but so did people from Appalachia and so on. And Bernard Lafayette and I walked into this group to this meeting, which Andy had sort of, with the back of his hand, said, All right, Bill, why don't you and Bernard handle that one? And we said, OK, sure, we will. And we went over and were overwhelmed and immediately sent a scout back, you know, Get the leader, he needs to see this, and get him over here, and so on. There was just such a tremendous turnout with such enthusiasm and so on. So, in fact, Dr. King was right all along. His hand was absolutely on the nerve of America. People did respond and would respond. But that was our sending out the call to affiliates or to allies in the community in America. But also we had to allay, or how should I say, parry the possible interference of the Black Panthers, other radical groups, who tended to disrupt peaceful demonstrations to use them for their own purposes, where they couldn't assemble a group of ten thousand whereas Dr. King could. They would then attempt to make their point and advance their agenda by disrupting the meeting and calling down repression, the more repression their thinking was, then the greater would be the public reaction, and rather than the contrary. So, we had various meetings with the Black Panthers, with some of the Black Power movement organizations, SNCC, what am I thinking? The, this New York outfit, Roy Innis' group at the time, which was also very militant, very much into the Black Power thing, and was not about to pretend that they were nonviolent, not at all, on the contrary. We went to see the Gray Beret – pardon me, the Brown Berets in Oakland. I remember going out at some point. We needed

permission. I made up an arrangement whereby any expenditure above a certain level in SCLC required two signatures, including one of the principles and myself or Bernard. And if there weren't, weren't two signatures available as far as I was concerned—

00:31:07:00

Interviewer:

We gotta stop here, the tape just went out?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Going, it's going.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, let's stop.

[cut]

[sound roll #427]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Continuation of camera on 4064. New sound roll 427.

00:31:14:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it. Mark it.

[slate]

00:31:18:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, start me with you and Bernard going off to meetings.

00:31:22:00

William Rutherford:

Mmm. Yes, Bernard and I had meetings with a number of, as I'd said, other community groups, and either asking them to participate in the Poor People's Campaign with us, or at

least not to interfere with the campaign. And we spoke with the Panthers in the West Coast in a couple of instances. We spoke with gang groups in Memphis. We smoke with—we spoke with SNCC leaders in Atlanta and Washington. One particular occasion I remember, Dr. King and Andy were there as well, and we spoke with Courteney [sic] Cox and Rap Brown and I believe Stokely Carmichael was there as well. And these guys who had been former members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had become absolutely fierce in terms of having accomplished nothing with nonviolence. And they wanted the short-circuit and, were not only not hesitating to turn to violence, but actually advocating it. And we really met with them on more than one occasion to insist that they not interfere with our program which was, by its very nature, nonviolent. And I remember one of their arguments saying, they said, No, no, no. They attempted to reassure us that they would not interfere, and Courteney [sic] made the statement, Our policy is that we will do nothing to impede the efforts of anything that anyone is doing to help Black people, and that was the position that they took. And we were not totally reassured, but that was their stated policy. And after we left that meeting in Washington, I remember saying to Dr. King, because I was very impressed with the force and the sincerity of Court—sincerity of Courteney's [sic] statement, and I said, Gee, that makes a lot of sense to me, and Dr. King wheeled on me and literally took my head off. He said, No. No. No. Absolutely not. It is not correct at all. Anything that has violence. It has no, nothing to do with who's doing it. He says, But it's absolutely anathema. It's the worst possible thing. Violence only brings more violence and you achieve nothing ever with violence. And he spoke with such heat and such strength, I realized then he was not simply taking my head off, because he rarely castigated an individual in front of others that way and with that strength. I realized he was articulating and repeating to himself his basic and fundamental thoughts on the subject of ends justifying means. He thought under no circumstances would violence ever be justified.

00:34:08:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut.

[cut]

[camera roll #4065]

Camera Crew Member #2:

A new camera roll, 4065.

00:34:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:34:16:00

Interviewer:

So, tell me, where did the idea come, and what did you do, and what happened?

00:34:20:00

William Rutherford:

Well, the idea of extending the call beyond the immediate constituency of SCLC grew out of the fact that in previous dem—demonstrations there'd been many non-Blacks who had come to participate in SCLC demonstrations, from Selma on. People who arrived spontaneously, voluntarily, and so on. And I was always rather impressed by the support that SCLC and the movement had generated around the world. So, at some point, we raised this in the staff meeting and Dr. King said, Well, absolutely. Contact as broad a cross-section of people as you can and invite them to participate. And I think at the time, there wasn't an anticipation that there would be a tremendous response. So, we went to our friends in the Friends Service Committee, to the Chicago Tenants Unit—Unit—Union, and other groups like that, that we knew had been active in civil rights to inform them about the Poor People's Campaign. So, we sent out a call to them through a mailing, to a mailing list that we'd gathered, over Dr. King's signature. And whereas we'd expected a token participation, as I said earlier, masses of people came to join us and turned out. Groups that we had never heard of, had no idea who they were or where they were from. They just began to arrive and to turn up as soon as the word got out. So, not only did we put out the word to civil rights activists, to civil rights participants, but to other groups, to other ethnic groups, and other social groups around the country.

00:36:00:00

Interviewer:

At the Paschal's meeting, what happened when they all got to Paschal's? What did you all do?

00:36:05:00

William Rutherford:

Well, when people came to attend the meeting at Paschal's, Bernard Lafayette and I, we made a presentation about the reasons for wanting to conduct the Poor People's Campaign, about our plans for the campaign, and what we really hoped to achieve. And this boiled up into a discussion, not of the situation in which Black Americans found themselves, but in, but the situation in which poor Americans found themselves. The Chicanos also spoke very strongly and pointedly to the issues of poverty in America. The poor Whites spoke very pointedly and

with great heat and passion to the issue of poverty in America, so did the Native Americans, and other participants who were there. We ended up with a several hours' meetings with dozens and dozens of people and organizations that we had never anticipated, which actually gave a larger dimension and a larger focus to the whole structure and thrust of the Poor People's Campaign.

00:37:08:00

Interviewer:

Were they comfortable participating at the end?

00:37:11:00

William Rutherford:

I think people were very happy to participate. And again, you had Appalachian, what, people that were once known as hillbillies. They were perfectly happy and comfortable working together with Black sharecroppers, and when the two groups would have totally ignored one another at some other time and point in history.

00:37:30:00

Interviewer:

There's a wonderful story you tell about Dr. King as a man, as a person, that takes place with that last organizing, the organizing meeting of the Poor People's Campaign. Can you tell me that story?

00:37:43:00

William Rutherford:

Well, that is the story, it's one of my favorite stories about Dr. King, and I think it's a real measure of the man. Here is a man who had met kings and princes, who had been with prime ministers, and leaders of the secular world and the religious world, and was very much a personality himself. And he had been able to put this call out that brought in, as I said, several hundred civil rights' workers from around the country at their own expense. Hitchhiking, walking, Lord knows how they all got to Atlanta, but they all came to Atlanta under their own steam, more or less. And were in the meeting where we were conducting the briefing, the orientation, and the planning, and the logistical arrangements, presentations, and so on, and Dr. King was to address the meeting. And he came very, very late for various reasons. It was shortly before his death, and I have other thoughts, I think he was really, had an intuition that something serious was going to happen, or something really, perhaps fatal was going to happen to him. But he came to the meeting really rather late, and there were these very impatient people who had come because he had asked, because the leader had

asked to come. And they were sitting waiting for him very impatiently within the hall, with, inside of Ebenezer Church, I think the Education Building of Ebenezer Church, and I was waiting for him on the sidewalk outside of the building. And so when he arrived, I was really just tremendously relieved that we could continue with the meeting and the orientation sessions. So, when he came, I literally grabbed him and said, you know, Martin, Martin, we're all waiting for you. We're all waiting for you. He said, Sure, he said, I'm here, he says, Everything's OK, everything's gonna be all right. And as we went into the church building, there was the janitor cleaning this spotless entry hall. And as we went in, Dr. King stopped, the meeting could wait for another minute at least, and he said, How is your wife? and the janitor looked up and with a nice smile he said, Well, she's doing right poorly, Doc. And Dr. King said, Well, say hello for me and I hope her back gets better. His concern at that moment was not about changing America and the world and so on, but he saw a human being before him, and he was concerned about the health and the well-being of the wife of the janitor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. And I found that most impressive. And I think you can use that to apply in many, many ways to Dr. King's thoughts and concerns, which basically always coming back to the individual, to the person, and the impact or the result of situations and events upon individuals.

00:40:31:00

Interviewer:

Toward the last two months of his life, he was under a lot of pressure. There was opposition from friends, there was some opposition from SCLC. Did he ever consider giving up the Poor People Campaign?

00:40:49:00

William Rutherford:

Well, the short answer's no. A bit longer answer is that certainly—

00:40:56:00

Interviewer:

Can I stop here one second? What I, I, I thought you were going to say that. Could you give the statement of, of incorporating the question. When I say, "Did he consider giving up the campaign?" So, did he, did he consider giving up the Poor People's Campaign?

00:41:10:00

William Rutherford:

Well, I think, if one asks oneself whether Dr. King ever considered really giving up the Poor People's Campaign, the short answer is no. But being a thoughtful reflective person, of

course he considered alternatives, the options, other directions to go, because of the opposition and disagreement he found on all sides of him, on all sides of himself. However, being a person of very strong convictions, once he decided that was the logical, reasonable, I should say, correct thing to do, there was, there was no alternative. He couldn't have done anything else. He knew that after achieving the Voters' Rights Act that allowed people to vote, after achieving a public accommodations law that allowed people to participate in public accommodations, that the economic issue was the great and key issue.

00:42:06:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut. That was great.

William Rutherford:

OK?

Interviewer:

That was great.

[cut]

00:42:10:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:42:14:00

Interviewer:

You told us a story at lunch about how you first heard of Dr. King's death, that you had been in Memphis, and then you came to Atlanta. Can you tell us that? How did you first hear? S-starting in Memphis and then…

00:42:29:00

William Rutherford:

Well, I, I first heard of Dr. King's death about two hours after having left him. So, it was obviously not only shocking, it was an unbelievable thought to me at the time, and remained

so for several days after his death. We had a weekly staff meeting on the subject of the Poor People's Campaign and other organizational matters wherever Dr. King happened to be. If Dr. King was in Atlanta, the staff meeting was held in Atlanta in his presence. I usually began the meeting, conducted most of the basic work. He came in and participated in those parts that concerned him, or to make a statement, or whatever he wanted to add to the agenda. We had had our staff meeting in Memphis at that time because he'd gone to, that week, he'd gone to Memphis in connection with the sanitation workers' strike. And after leaving him, Tom Offenburger, who is our, another one of the heroes of the movement, as far as I'm concerned, with Tom Offenburger who was our information chief and so on, we returned to Atlanta by plane, thirty-five-minute flight. We arrived in Atlanta Airport, took a taxi to SCLC office, and it was a scene of total pandemonium as we arrived at the office on Auburn Avenue. People were screaming and fainting and literally rendering themselves, tearing their clothing, and so on and so forth, and we said, What on earth is happening? And, you know, some young woman s—screamed at us, Dr. King has been shot! Dr. King has been shot! I said, Well, that's hardly possible. We just left him, we just left him. So, I went in the office and attempted to telephone to Memphis. And of course, I couldn't get through for hours. But then we had the radio on and we began hearing the radio broadcast that reported, not only that he had been shot, but that he'd actually died. And that was the way that we learned of his death, having left him. All of the senior staff was with him in Memphis, either at the time of his death or very shortly before.

00:44:34:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. You told me that in the weeks following, specifically that you, there was this general feeling you got that he would come through the door. Can you tell me about it?

00:44:44:00

William Rutherford:

Oh, it took me ages and ages to accept the fact that Dr. King was definitely dead. He was such an active man. He was such a force and a presence. And his presence continued and continues to live on in many, many people, including myself, and it was just unbelievable, and I suppose psychological unacceptable that he would not be coming back. And in the midst of all this chaos and pandemonium in the SCLC office and headquarters, I kept expecting Dr. King to walk through the door at any minute saying, All right, come on, this is great [clock chimes] but why don't we stop—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

William Rutherford:

—the nonsense now and get back to work.

00:45:21:00

Interviewer:

Can we do that again but without the clock [laughs] in the background?

William Rutherford:

[laughs] Oh, you heard that, did ya?

[cut]

[camera roll #4066]

00:45:26:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[coughs]

[slate]

00:45:29:00

Interviewer:

OK, it's in the aftermath of Dr. King's death. Tell me what you were feeling and what that expectation was.

00:45:38:00

William Rutherford:

After Dr. King's death, my personal feeling was one of such unbelief, disbelief for days, and I'd say even weeks after the actual event. I was convinced that he would be there again, that he'd come in at any minute, and the world would continue in the sensible way it'd been, it had been going before he was killed. I could not accept the fact of his death for many months, in fact, after, after the fact. And I'm sure that was true for many people. Dr. King was such a presence and his presence was felt, and so deeply, and so penetratingly in so many of us, I think he was and is with us after his death, and continues to be with us.

00:46:29:00

Interviewer:

If he'd come through that door, what would he have said to you?

00:46:31:00

William Rutherford:

He would have said, Well, this has been a tumultuous time but let's stop the nonsense now and get back to work. He was a very dedicated, devoted man and the only thing on his mind, essentially, was advancing the cause of civil rights in America and in the world. Dr. King, in that sense, as you know, was not parochial at all. He was concerned about advancing, really, the cause of human rights in the world.

00:47:03:00

Interviewer:

Can you do that line again but pr-preface it with, with, "I almost expected him to come through the door and then he would have said," so—

William Rutherford:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

—your feeling and then the expectation of him coming through, and what he would have said. So, how were you feeling then?

00:47:20:00

William Rutherford:

Yes, it was such a feeling of disbelief. I actually expected Dr. King to come through the door at any m—moment and stop the tumult, stop the chaos and the pandemonium, and said, That's enough. Let's get back to work. That's actually what I expected to happen.

00:47:43:00

Interviewer:

That was great. Cut.

[cut]

00:47:46:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:47:49:00

Interviewer:

OK, it's the same time period, SCLC has to go on with Resurrection City. What were your expectations for Resurrection City?

00:47:58:00

William Rutherford:

Well, ***the purpose and the goal of the poor people's campaign was to focus the attention of the nation and the world on poverty. The technique, the tactic being used, was to gather the poorest of the poor in the nation's capital, in the heart of the wealthiest country in the world, to camp them, these homeless, hungry people in the heart of this city in this fabulous mall situated between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Memorial.*** Take the plea and the complaint of the poor to each of the government agencies, to each of the instances of the United States government with their complaint, to take them to the Department of Agriculture where they deal with food, to take them to the Department of Justice where they deal with laws and the application of laws, to take them to the Department of In—of the Interior where the Chicano and the Native Americans have very serious problems of land tenure and so on. The thrust, the tactic of the Poor People's Campaign was in dealing with our own government to focus and attract the attention of the world on these problems, which are ever-present but which, by and large, then as now, are largely ignored by the masses of Americans, or which are not really focused on by the masses of Americans.

00:49:25:00

Interviewer:

Right after the assassination, how did you feel about Resurrection City? Did you feel that it would really succeed, that it could succeed, or that it was something that you had to do for his legacy?

00:49:35:00

William Rutherford:

Well, there, after the assassination, we continued with the Poor People's Campaign, in part because of the momentum that had been generated prior to his death. But also because it was the agenda that had been set by the leader, and who, given the horrendous events taking place, would ever have even considered changing the agenda? Who would have had the authority, the weight, the vision? No one ever surfaced that could have given us a valid reason for changing Dr. King's plan. On the contrary, his assassination probably made the need to go ahead with the program more deeply entrenched and more deeply felt than prior to his death. We followed the agenda that the leader had set, and there was no further discussion as to whether or not there would be a Poor People's Campaign. If people had ever wanted to avoid having a Poor People's Campaign, they certainly achieved exactly the opposite result by murdering its leader and chief thinker. [phone rings]

00:50:49:00

Interviewer:

Why don't we cut for a second?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Cut for a second.

William Rutherford:

Yes, that's—

[cut]

00:50:54:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:50:56:00

Interviewer:

At what point did you realize that, that Resurrection City was not gonna work?

00:51:03:00

William Rutherford:

I think the impression that Resurrection City was a failing cause occurred probably two or three weeks into the campaign for the demonstration. That is, we'd anticipated a reaction on the part of the American public, under the impact of the publicity that we'd hoped to generate, that would have helped achieve the goal of focusing attention on the plight of the poor in America. And within two or three weeks after the demonstrations at the Department of Justice, at the FBI Building, at the Department of Agriculture, and so on, it became more and more clear that this was not happening, was not about to happen. In fact, I would say that the culmination of the Poor People's Campaign, which left thwarted and frustrated the hundreds and thousands of people who had come from all parts of the country, who had no homes to go to, who were deeply buried in poverty and who remained buried in poverty despite the Poor People's Campaign, and were left, I mean, completely stranded. They were the survivors of what I said at one point, could be described as the Little Bighorn of the civil rights movement. I would say that the civil rights movement probably began to dec—began to decline to the point it's reached today as a result of the failure, and at the end of the Poor People's Campaign. I think the civil rights movement has never regained the strength and dynamism that it had prior to the Poor People's Campaign.

00:52:46:00

Interviewer:

Cut for one second?

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[cut]

00:52:49:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:52:52:00

Interviewer:

What do you remember about the last day in Resurrection City? What stands out to you?

00:52:56:00

William Rutherford:

The last days of Resurrection City were like being in the camp of a defeated army. I think the spirit went out of people. There were people there who had no place to go. People who had come to Washington, who'd come to Resurrection City with a great deal of hope, [traffic sounds] ***and who had none left.*** When I say it was like Little Bighorn for the civil rights movement, in fact, it was the end of the hopes and dreams of many, many people who had come from various parts of the country to participate. It was a very sad, depressed, and depressing [traffic sounds] scene altogether. You may remember that we had terrible weather at the time. The city was bogged down in mud and rain. Resurrection City was as bad as any battlefield that there could have been in any of the great wars, with the foot soldiers slogging through the mud. It was a thoroughly depressed and depressing place. And in effect, for me, it began the long decline of the civil rights movement.

00:54:12:00

Interviewer:

What about that day? What do you remember of the last day, things you saw, things that were happening?

00:54:17:00

William Rutherford:

Well, there were really very sad scenes. There were people with no place to go clinging to these frame shanties. It was an instant shanty town there. People with very few possessions, poor possessions, things that you wonder why or how a human being could have their total worldly goods reluce—reduced to such a small lot of almost nothing. But friends saying goodbye, friends being separated, strangers who had become friends during the weeks of the Poor People's Campaign and Resurrection City. It was a very unhappy and miserable scene from every point of view. The point of view of the weather, the results of the campaign, and so on.

00:55:06:00

Interviewer:

Cut. Thank you.

[cut]

[camera roll #4067]

00:55:08:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:55:11:00

Interviewer:

So, take yourself back to, you're at the edge of Resurrection City, and the police are about to move in. What was it like there?

00:55:18:00

William Rutherford:

The last day of Resurrection City, as I said, I can continue this simile about a camp at the end of a battle or a war, the camp was largely abandoned, very few people were left. They'd been warned, they'd been given a delay to leave the premises, and they were being, in effect, evicted by the Capitol and Park Police. And there was a cap that went off, and it sounded like a shot. And of course, everyone was very apprehensive and nervous about possible violence. And of course, it was not a shot, I don't know really what the noise was, perhaps a firecracker. But the police in this long blue line moved forward, and they actually fired teargas and we got a good whiff of teargas, those of us who were supervising or serving as observers for the evacuation of the camp. And there was this smoke from the teargas rising from the ground, again, like an abandoned battlefield. And as you moved forward across the site, ***it was literally at the end of a, a major battle, a battle of the poor, and they'd lost.***

00:56:22:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

One.

00:56:26:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:56:29:00

Interviewer:

Was there suspicion among those people in the SCLC staff that it might be somebody internally leaking information to the FBI?

00:56:38:00

William Rutherford:

I think there was a great deal of suspicion, even paranoia, amongst the staff concerning the activities of the FBI, that somehow managed to be extremely well-informed, under the strangest of circumstances, about coming and goings and movements and so on. And at the point, it became quite clear that there was an FBI informant very closely connected with SCLC. Of course, the question became, Who could it be? Who might it be? I think at some point, I was accused of being the spy, many people were accused of being the spy, until it became really quite ridiculous. And in the long run, there actually was an FBI informer on the staff, he was the last one anyone would ever have thought of. And of course, it became a kind of in-house family joke, like, All right, take that to the FBI and see how they like it. [laughs] Right? So, no, it was very widely known that the FBI had Dr. King, and presumably the whole organization, under surveillance. And it reached a point where I made it very clear, people were saying, Well, let's not discuss this on the telephone or that on the telephone. And my policy, and I made it very clear to the staff, that we had no secrets, and we would have no secrets. And the best way to counter the FBI surveillance was to say exactly what we thought, what we were doing, what we were planning to do, because there was absolutely nothing that we were doing, planning, or thinking that was in any way either subversive or illegal. So, my response to the FBI informant and surveillance was just more light and more sunshine on everything we were doing. That, in itself, I thought, was a form of protection for what we were trying to do.

00:58:22:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:58:26:00

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