

Interview with **Sheyann Webb**

December 6, 1985

Production Team: C

Camera Rolls: 577-579

Sound Rolls: 1534-1535

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 577]

[sound roll 1534]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

[sync tone]

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

INTERVIEWER: OK. YOU WERE EIGHT YEARS OLD IN 1965. HOW DOES AN EIGHT YEAR OLD GIRL GET INVOLVED IN THE VOTING RIGHTS CAMPAIGN?

Webb: It was a very unusual situation with me being eight years old getting involved in the civil rights movement here in Selma. However, it was a unique experience for me. It was one rare situation on my way to school one day and I saw black and white people mingling together, something that was very unusual for me to see. And on that day, on my way to school, as I crossed the street I was wondering, I was always an inquisitive child anyway, I was wondering why these people were standing in front of Brown's Chapel AME Church. And I had crossed the street to continue on to go to school and as they mingled into the church, I began to cross back over to the church and follow them. And when I followed them into the church, I sat in the back of Brown's Chapel AME Church and observed and listened and as much as I could, but I still didn't quite understand what was happening. But, at the

time, there was one thing that I did remember from that first meeting and that was the, the different leaders who began to talk about a man by the name of Dr. Martin Luther King. And, I think, that that initial point was me sitting in the back of the pew on that day to see why these people were together started my interest in the civil rights movement in Selma.

00:01:53:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M GONNA HAVE YOU—JUST PULL THE HAIR BACK A LITTLE BIT.

Webb: Oh.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OVER THE LEFT EYE. JUST TO MAKE THAT I CAN SEE IT. THERE YOU GO. MUCH BETTER.

INTERVIEWER: THANK YOU.

Webb: [coughs]

INTERVIEWER: NOW, THAT DAY WAS JANUARY 2ND, 1965, WHICH WAS THE FIRST BIG MEETING HERE IN TOWN, WHEN MARTIN LUTHER KING WAS COMING. WHEN HE CAME THAT DAY AND, AND, AND WALKED INTO THE CHURCH, I MEAN, WHAT WAS IT LIKE THERE?

Webb: It was a, a feeling that is, is very difficult for me to explain. However, it was like Santa Claus had come to town. That's the best way that I could describe it, simply because even after the big meeting, Rachel and myself talked about Dr. King so many times without even knowing him. But the way that people talked about this man, he was like Jesus and we were looking forward to meeting him. And we had come to this meeting that night that he was to arrive at Brown's Chapel Church and when he came in the door to come up to the pulpit, people began to stand on their feet, clap their hands. You can just see the enthusiasm, the expressions from people from the way they clapped their hands. And they began to sing, "Glory, Glory Hallelujah," and we did the same thing. We was just following them and it was amazing. It was an amazing feeling for me and sometimes when I listen to him, right now, I can still feel that same feeling, because it was just an experience that, you know, it would never go away. It was a thrill to see him and the, and the, the smile and expression on his face and the way people reacted to it. And it wasn't just that that time. At every meeting that he had come to it was this type of enthusiasm and it just, it just was a motivation point each time for, for myself.

00:03:46:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: LET'S PUSH THE HAIR BACK.

Webb: Oh.

INTERVIEWER: [laughs] YOU'LL PROBABLY HAVE TO DO IT EVERYTIME. IT'S OK.

Webb: OK [laughs].

INTERVIEWER: PRETEND THAT I'M A, A PERSON THAT HAS NEVER SEEN DR. KING AND DESCRIBE HIM FOR ME THROUGH THE EYES—WAY YOU SAW HIM. YOU KNOW, BIG, SMALL, YOU KNKOW, ROUND, TALL, WHATEVER. JUST DESCRIBE HIM FOR ME.

Webb: I saw Dr. King as a strong, medium-sized, patient man. A leader. One who could talk and deliver and you could receive his message regardless of how old you were. If you would just look at him there was a message that was coming from him visually without him even speaking a word. And, I believe, you know, a lot of people ask me, how could you be so young at the age of seven, eight years old to become involved in the civil rights when you really didn't know what it was all about? I really didn't know what it was all about, but he was the person who really kept me involved and wanted me to continue to be interested in whatever that struggle was about. And, as a result of that, I grew up in the movement and realized what was happening little by little, but he was the factor. It's—it was just, it was an, a—he was an incredible person. It's just so difficult for me to explain, but his message just came from his outer appearance as well as, as well as his heart. So he was a great person. That's all I can say. He was a great person. A great leader, a strong, and most of all, he was patient.

00:05:40:00

INTERVIWER: NOW, HOW DID HE ACT WHEN YOU AND RACHEL—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: LET'S, LET'S PULL THE HAIR BACK.

Webb: Oh.

INTERVIEWER: PULL IT BACK AFTER EACH ANSWER THAT'S THE—[laughs]. HOW DID HE ACT WITH YOU AND RACHEL?

Webb: I recall one particular incident with Rachel and myself. One evening Dr. King had pulled up with some other people, there were about seven men, and they pulled up in a beautiful car. And Rachel and I didn't know this was Dr. King coming because we always played in front of the church. And we saw this beautiful blue car, there were two of them, and we saw about four, five, six men get out of it and we saw Dr. King. And we ran up to Dr. King and it was like we had to push our way through to get to him and they were mingling into the church on the side door for a, a meeting. And as we approached Dr. King he spoke to us. Asked us how, how we were doing, he said, what do you all, what do you want children? And we said, freedom. Because after one particular mass meeting that he had spoken with,

we followed him all the way to the car and he said, what do you all, what do you want children? And we said, what do we want? We said, freedom, because that was one of the cheers, one of the mottos of the movement. What do you want? Freedom now! And on this particular occasion, Dr. King had come here for a meeting and Rachel and I went into the meeting and the, and the other men who were with him were telling us that we had to leave, but he told 'em no, let 'em stay. And I will never forget it and we sat there through the entire meeting just waiting patiently for him. And he asked us on the way out, were we gonna march? And we said, we're gonna march for our freedom. [laughs] And I remember that very well.

00:07:24:00

INTERVIEWER: DID HE ASK THIS—THE HAIR. I'M SORRY. [laughs]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SORRY ABOUT THAT.

Webb: I'm sorry too.

INTERVIEWER: DID—EVERY TIME YOU SAW HIM YOU WOULD—WOULD YOU GET AN OPPORTUNITY? THE TWO OF YOU TALK—

Webb: We made it. It was difficult at times, but we made it to him and it got to the point whenever he came for meetings we would get up on the pulpit and sit on his lap. And sing—he used to love to hear us sing, “Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around.”

INTERVIEWER: SING IT

Webb: Oh I can't sing. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: COME ON. SHOW, SHOW ME HOW YOU USED TO SING IT WHEN YOU SAT ON HIS LAP.

Webb: Well, it, it was, it was a different, different feeling at the time. I can sing it now, but the, the type of spirit that existed that time would, wouldn't exemplify.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Webb: But, but it's, it's still one of my favorites. It's, it's a strong, good song and it carried us a long way.

00:08:26:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. PULL YOUR HAIR BACK, YOU KNOW.

Webb: OK.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID YOUR PARENTS SAY WHEN YOU WOULD COME HOME FROM THESE MEETINGS?

Webb: Well, at the time, my parents were afraid. I used to ask my parents questions day after day once I had become—getting involved with the movement. And there were quite a few things I didn't understand prior to me becoming involved and even after I had become involved with the movement there were quite a few things that I still didn't understand. And I used to always go home and ask my mother questions about why they weren't registered voters. Because this seemed to be one of the main topics when I had first—when I didn't know anything about voting. Then I went home after one meeting I asked my mama was she and my daddy registered voters? And she told me no. And I asked her why and they said that because if they had become registered voters, they would be fired from their jobs probably and they couldn't feed us. They wouldn't have the money to feed us. And I didn't quite understand it. I said, well, white people are registered voters. Why can't you be registered voters? And she told me—well, at that time too, my parents were also afraid of me—of getting involved in something like this. They knew it was something that I didn't understand and had no business being involved in, but I was still determined to disobey them. And after each meeting, what I would do is, is get a Freedom Fighter, you know the leaders, some of the main leaders who are leaders today, like Andy Young, Hosea Williams, Jesse Jackson. I'd get—those people were called Freedom Fighters then. I would get one of those people to walk me home to keep me from getting' a whipping. [laughs] And my mother and father would still tell me, don't go to the meetings. But I would still find some way of going and after, even, going to meetings after meetings, things began to somehow spread in—not only in this community which we lived in, but even in the school system. Because my teachers were asking me questions when I used to go to school. They used to ask me questions, because they were afraid to come to meetings and they knew that I was there [laughs]. And it was the same thing with me at home, but they were, basically, afraid, you know, of me being involved.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I THINK WE'D BETTER CHANGE.

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S RIGHT. IT'S PROBABLY—

[cut]

00:10:58:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 578]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

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

INTERVIEWER: WHAT IMPRESSED YOU MOST ABOUT THE DAY THAT THE TEACHERS MARCHED?

Webb: It was really a good feeling just to see them because after having—

INTERVIEWER: START THAT AGAIN. TELL ME WHO “THEM” IS.

Webb: Oh. OK.

INTERVIEWER: RIGHT. I KNOW NOT EVERYBODY ELSE WILL KNOW.

Webb: OK.

INTERVIEWER: GO AHEAD.

Webb: What impressed me most ab—about the teachers the day that the teachers marched was just the idea of them being there marching. Simply because prior to their marching I used to have to go to school and it was like a report, you know. I had to report to my teachers, because they were afraid. They were just as afraid as my parents were because they would lose their jobs. *And it was amazing to see how many teachers had participated. I remember vividly, on that day, when I saw my teachers marching with me, you know, just for the right to vote.* And that was really a thrill for me. And I didn't have to go back and report to them anymore because they were—they had the opportunity to start coming to the mass meeting themselves from that point on. But it was really, really amazing and that—and I remember one teacher who was—one who wasn't afraid. And, I think, she was the only black teacher in Selma who stood out from the other teachers and that was Mrs. Margaret Moore. And she was the teacher who always—I would always hang around with and march with and she used to always tell me, baby don't be afraid. You're young, but just don't be afraid. She say, sooner or later, we're gonna have some followers and they did follow us on that day. It was just a thrill.

00:12:42:00

INTERVIEWER: BLOODY SUNDAY.

Webb: [coughs]

INTERVIEWER: WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU ON BLOODY SUNDAY? TELL ME. BRING ME BACK TO THAT TIME AND TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED.

Webb: On Bloody Sunday, I was a very frightened child, simply because the night before Bloody Sunday there was a mass meeting. And at that particular mass meeting, there was speeches about—several speeches about Bloody Sunday and some possibility—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I KNOW THIS IS GONNA BE GOOD AND I'M HAVING

A LITTLE PROBLEM WITH THE HAIR.

Webb: Oh, OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'D RATHER TELL YOU NOW.

INTERVIEWER: OH, OH. SCARED ME TO DEATH, OK. OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, HERE WE GO.

INTERVIEWER: JUST START WITH—AGAIN.

Webb: OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Webb: On Bloody Sunday I was a very frightened child. I think that was one of the most scariest days of my life and I'll never forget that day, simply because I saw some things that I never thought I would see even though I had heard that some of these things had happened and some of 'em may happen, but I had no idea that they will ha—happen, but it did. And I saw it. And I'll never forget it. I remember the night prior to Bloody Sunday, there was a mass meeting and there was several speakers talking about what our procedures would be for the march for Bloody Sunday and it would be possible that we would not be successful with that march. But I was still determined, as a child, to march. And even after going home to bed that night, I couldn't really sleep well. And I remember that very well, because after I had come home from that meeting, I asked my mother, would she march? And I told her that I was gonna march anyway and she did tell me if I marched I will be whipped. But I was still determined to march. And on that next day, I came out and rallied with the rest of the people to gather for the march and I remember telling Rachel—well, Rachel's parents had informed her that she couldn't march and she was afraid and I was too, but I was still determined. And I remember getting ready to get in line and I was with Mrs. Moore, Margaret Moore, and I told Mrs. Moore that I was afraid and she told me, she said, don't be afraid. She was always a good ins—inspiration for me. And it was like my heart was beating real fast as if this was my last time, but I was still determined. And I remember walking and as we got closer and closer to the bridge, my eyes began to water, that's just how afraid I was. And I wanted to turn back and I didn't wanna [sic] turn back. And I said to myself, if they can go, I can go too. And I remember as we approached the bridge, I was getting frightened more and more. And as we got to the top of the bridge I could see hundreds of policemen, state troopers, billy clubs, dogs, and horses and I began to just cry. And, and I remember the ministers who were at the front of the line saying, kneel down to pray. And I knelt down and I said to myself, Lord, help me. And once we had gotten up, *all I could remember was outbursts of tear gas. And I saw people being beaten, and I began to just try to run home as fast as I could. And as I began to run home, I saw horses behind me. And I, I will never forget, a Freedom Fighter picked me up, Hosea Williams, and I told him to put me down. He wasn't running fast enough. And I ran, and I ran, and I ran.* It was like I was running for my life until I got home. And as I approached my door, my mother and father, my brothers and sisters were

waiting there for me, because they had no idea that I was gonna to do it. But I did it. And I ran up the stairs, I was frightened. And I remember my mother and father coming up and trying to calm me down and I did later. But even so, I still wanted to come back to this church. You could hear sirens, you could hear people crying, you could hear many cries of pain like oppressed people. And I was still determined to come back to Brown's Chapel Church and I was willing to go again. And that night I wrote my funeral arrangement. And that determination came from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was a day that I'll never forget and I'm, I'm really glad that I had that experience, even though, that I really wouldn't have wanted it to be that way, but it has really shown me a lot of life, period.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SOUND ROLL OUT.

[sound roll out]

[cut]

00:18:09:00

[change to sound roll 1535]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND ROLL SOUND.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: THANK YOU. ALL RIGHTY [sic].

INTERVIEWER: WHEN THE MARCH TO MONTGOMERY FINALLY GOT STARTED, THE FINAL MARCH AFTER ALL THAT STUFF THAT HAPPENED IN THE MIDDLE, YOU ONLY GOT SO FAR, YOU TOLD ME. CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT OF WHY THAT HAPPENED?

Webb: Well, first of all, I had gotten a little older for the final march to Montgomery. I was at a predominant white school and, at the time, I was, I was still involved in the movement, but I was getting threats from my teachers about that prior to this march. And, and even with my parents and, at this point, it, it was a burden on my grades. And my parents had indicated to me over and over again, please don't march. And I had written them a note, prior to the morning of this march, and left it on the washer saying that, I'm sorry Mom and Dad, but I'm gonna march. And I did. And on the way to Montgomery, there was a rest stop and there was sandwiches and soup and all those good things. And I went to the front where Dr. King was and I told him, I said, I don't have permission to, to march. And he said, you don't? [laughs] But I'm gonna march anyway. And he said, OK now. Who, who are you with? I said, I'm with Margaret Moore. And I went back to where she was and I went on. But they put me in a van—I didn't march on, you know, all the way. I was transported on into Montgomery in a van. And I remember going to the Albert Pick Hotel [sic] where some of the secretaries and



assistants for, you know, Dr. King were there. And they were very concerned with me at the time continuing to march without, you know, my parents knowing. And we went on to St. Jude that night for the mass rally and I recall an announcement over the intercom, Sheyann Webb, your parents are behind the stage waiting for you. And I went back there and I was just—I was real nervous because, I had gotten a little older. I knew a little better [laughs] and I had already been warned also. And my mother and father, they weren't as mad as I thought they were, but the first thing that they told was that I was suspended from school because I marched. And that wasn't too bad, at the time, I was more afraid of the whipping than anything else. And as we traveled back to Selma that night, they indicated to me that the principal of my school had called and said that I would be suspended for three days. And they would have to bring me back. And when I had gotten home, my father sat down and talked to me. He said, now, you know, that you will fail school now to continue being involved, and I didn't say anything. And when I did go back to school it was, it was a little different. A different feeling simply because I didn't know that it would—had gotten to that point with me being suspended. But I still passed [laughs] [coughs].

INTERVIEWER: HOW FAR—HOW MANY FEET DO WE HAVE? ARE WE ABOUT TO RUN OUT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'RE ABOUT TO RUN OUT.

[cut]

00:21:50:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 579]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OOPS. SECOND STICKS.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: THAT WAS SECOND STICKS IN THERE.

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

INTERVIEWER: EVEN THOUGH YOU DIDN'T MARCH THE WHOLE WAY TO MONTGOMERY, YOU WERE THERE AT THE STEPS AT THE END OF THE MARCH, THE FINAL SPEECH DR. KING MADE. HOW DID YOU FEEL THEN WHEN ALL

THOSE PEOPLE, THOSE TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND PEOPLE, HAVING MADE IT ALL THE WAY?

Webb: I felt real good simply because, I saw—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M SORRY. COULD WE DO THAT AGAIN? I, I MADE A BAG MOVE HERE. I COULD JUST HAVE YOU START THAT AGAIN.

INTERVIEWER: OK. HE MOVED. NO, YOU WERE FINE. [laughs]

Webb: OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK. GO AHEAD JUST START AGAIN.

Webb: I felt real good at the last march at the point where—it was like we had overcome. We had reached the point at which we were fighting for, for a long time. And if you were to just stand there in the midst of thousands and thousands of people and all of the great leaders and, and, and political people who have come from all over the world. It was it was just a thrill. And I think, even, you know, at the time, even though I didn't get the opportunity to stay during the whole rally just the idea of me having the opportunity to be there, you know, it, it proved that I had reached you know, my point. Even though I didn't have, you know, permission to do none of these things, [laughs] as I, you know, talked about over and over again. But it was, it was a, a, a great, great, you know, time.

00:23:36:00

INTERVIEWER: IF THERE HAD NOT EVER BEEN A MOVEMENT IN SELMA, WHAT DO YOU THINK IT WOULD'VE BEEN LIKE NOW? WHAT DO YOU THINK WOULD HAVE HAPPENED?

Webb: First of all, I think that—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: LET'S PUSH THE HAIR BACK. I'M SORRY.

Webb: First of all, I think that if there had not been a movement, a great movement like the civil rights movement have taken place in Selma that a lot of us wouldn't be aware of a lot of the voting rights. We, we just wouldn't be aware of several things that that we had become aware of during that movement. And for one thing, if there hadn't been that movement, I probably wouldn't be where I am today. I—my, my train of thought would probably be way in far left lane, because that that movement played a very important role in my life up until this point. And, and I could say so many things for the great leader, Dr. Martin Luther King. If there hadn't been Dr. Martin Luther King where would we all be? Where—he, he just brought some initiative among black people as well as white all over the world, politically, economically, and we're still trying to follow that path from which he has, has left. So, not only, you know, in Selma, but all over the world he has really enlightened our minds and our goals and has given us some determination to be where we, we oughta [sic] be and to do

what we need to do.

00:25:22:00

INTERVIEWER: WHEN YOU THINK BACK ON THAT TIME, WHAT, WHAT IS YOUR MOST VIVID MEMORY OUTSIDE OF BLOODY SUNDAY? IN ADDITION TO BLOODY SUNDAY?

Webb: My most vivid memories is [sic] when, I asked my mother and father for my birthday present to become registered voters. And it was the way in which they, they did it. It was, it was a very diligent—I mean, they took off. I asked them, after they had marched on the voters rights march with the teachers, if they would go and register to vote. And, as a matter of fact, after they had become registered voters they took me to the polls with them to vote. I would never forget it.

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE EXCITED?

Webb: I was very excited. And, and, you know, what even made it so unique to me was the fact just something being so simple. Just a check on the ballot. At that particular time they didn't have a machines, they had to check. And I thought it was a long, drawn out thing, because of how people had to really fight for that, you know. And it was just a matter of walking over to a building and them making their checks. And that was very exciting for me to see it and it was exciting for them to have that right as well as for me to see them do it.

00:26:50:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: IT'S GREAT.

INTERVIEWER: I WANTED TO GO BACK—JUST ASK ONE MORE QUESTION AND THAT IS, BEFORE THE MOVEMENT CAME IN AND ALL THIS STUFF HAD HAPPENED—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: YOU ROLLING JOHN?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: YEAH.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT, WHAT WAS IT LIKE BEING A KID IN SELMA AT THAT TIME? YOU KNOW, BEFORE ANY OF THE MOVEMENT STUFF HAPPENED. WAS IT FUN? I MEAN, I DON'T HAVE ANY SENSE OF IT AT ALL.

Webb: To me it was fun, simply because I enjoyed, with the rest of my family, the best that we had, you know, with what we had to enjoy. We were very poor. We didn't have much money. We didn't, didn't have as many opportunities that we liked to have had, but I enjoyed my life. I don't think I would rather come up any differently, you know, because, it's, it's a certain feeling that you get and it's a certain way of life, enhancement with personality with coming up poor the way that myself and Rachel and some others had come up in a very poor

community with something so historic coming a part of our life. And us seeing the difference, you know. And that's, that's something that's very unique. Like right now I travel in different communities and work with children who remind me a lot when I was a kid, but the only thing that their missing is that great historic moment and opportunity that we had. The opportunity to encounter with and we had the opportunity to meet the great leader of that movement. You know, and there are some things that an individual could experience that will have a bearings on their lives for the, for the rest of their lives. And it could, it could mold your life in such a special way that nobody else could understand. And, I think, that that, that movement speaks well for me. And, I think, one of the, the negative, most unexciting part about it is that I see young people my age and, and younger who still not aware of that great movement. And some who, who really not aware of Dr. King. And that's what my mission is to try to go and, and, and tell people about our story. Because, you know, it's just something that has to be told in the eyes of young people as well as, you know. And I'm looking forward to telling my kids, [laughs] letting them know, you know, because it was, it was just something that that's hard to explain in a, in a lot of ways. Just an experience.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: GREAT. AND—

INTERVIEWER: WE'RE CUTTING.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:30:00:00

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