

RUBY SALES INTERVIEW

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IN: Then I'd like to ask what you do -- what you've been doing...

RS: OK.

IN: ...since the Alabama Project, which could be interesting.

So it's...

RS: Alright, sure.

IN: ...going to be series of questions like that...

RS: Is it OK for me to just...

IN: Oh yeah, great, you know, relax, take it easy, we're not going to...you know...

RS: OK.

IN: So maybe you can tell us how you got involved in the Alabama Project.

RS: I became involved in the Alabama Project when I was a student in the Wincheskihe. Students became involved in voter registration, and we were, actually, it was a very funny situation because we were encouraged in some real ways by the dean, who at that time was Dean Phillips, and some of our professors, like Jean Willey. Jean Willey, who was my English teacher at Wincheskihe, and they had some re-re-real serious concerns about...ah...racism and "Jim Crow" laws of the South and they were really committed to the movement and really encouraged empowerment and active participation by students so that when I became involved, involved, in the Wincheskihe, um, Project, in the Alabama Project, it was in some real ways approved of by the school. And, um, my first big adventure outside of the Wincheskihe was to the mark, to Montgomery, when the Wincheskihe, when students went to the Montgomery when there was this historic moment that was called the Wincheskihe, um, March, the Wincheskihe Pee In; where, literally, we were closed in the capital and we were not

allowed to leave that area, or go to the bathroom, or to, um, get water or anything, and and we stayed, ah, there, and it was really the first time in my sixteen years that I really really realized people were really violent because I had come from a very protective and a very sheltered environment and literally when we started singing "Come By Here Lord, Comeby Here", I really expected the sky to open up and come...and that, and and that that someone would appear in a chariot and would really slay these horrible men on horses and dogs and I think that it was my really first kind of questioning of religion, of organized religion, and really relooking at certain kinds of questions that I had just kind of taken for granted, and answers I had taken for granted. So in some real ways that experience was the beginning of a new voice for myself. And the movement was very important to me because it it gave me the words to talk about who I was in the world and that to be in the world on the Jim Crow and what it meant to be black and ah, it was a very empowering experience for me and literally walked around in a daze with a new language and new words and through the new sense of excitement, you know, that really becomes a part of you when you realize something important is happening to you and you're a connection to the world and a sense that things will never be the same again...

IN: What was the old language?

RS: Well, the old language was a language that in some real ways was predicated on denial and in some real ways didn't even name the condition, in some real ways it not so that while we grew up in the South, and in terms of Jim Crow I did not have access to the language that would call it what it was so it was literally at Wincheskine that I began to get the historical names and get the language that would

name my condition, as a person and a first person. Um...it was at Wincheskihe that I learned about ____ it was during that time that I learned about Markus Garry. It was during that time that time that I read James Baldwin, so in some real ways I talk of that time at Wincheskihe as a kind of baptism for myself and in a black community when you are baptized you come out of that process reborn again. So I kind of see that as a kind of rebirth.

IN: And were you a freshman at this time?

RS: I was a freshman, yes, uh huh. I came from Columbus, Georgia so I became involved in the movement my freshman year but even though I didn't have the language I had a rebellious nature that had always rebelled against Jim Crow; for example, I had sat in the front of the bus you know in my home town even before, um, you know it happened at Montgomery. I was known to go to local department stores and push the limits of segregation so, ah, while I didn't have the language I certainly came from a family whose spirit was rebellious against the system. So I I brought that rebellion to Wincheskihe.

IN: Did you become a "Snicked Member" at Wincheskihe?

RS: Yes, I did.

IN: You did. Who organized that at wincheskihe?

RS: Um, we, after, during the Montgomery March or the Montgomery Sit In, the Wincheskihe students we worked that Sit In with Snicked people and so it was during that time that I met Snicked people and they asked for volunteers to go into the country and they explained to us the bloody history of Llamas County, and they explained to us...ah...that this was not a safe environment and and and that you could get killed and but I decided that I wanted to go into Lamos County and I wanted to be a part of something that took me outside of my individual life and

place me in a context, you know, in a historical context. I wanted to be a part of the experience and at that time I was, I mean, there were the songs that we would sing "I'd die for my freedom" and at that age I really did feel that I would die. I mean you came to that process with that kind of innocence and naivete and that kind of commitment.

IN: How did you prepare for that? We find that with a lot of people.

RS: I didn't understand death. There was nothing to prepare for. Uh, one just did what one had to do because it was the goal and the ideal that you were committed to and if you die then you die but I wasn't sure, clear, that I understood dying was forever.

IN: Uh-huh, and, and, ah, was it in early August then that you went into Llamas County or earlier?

RS: No, I went into Llamas County about, um, during the school year. I would go down into Llamas County during the weekend and sometimes during the week. As a matter of fact, ah, the second semester beginning in January I really while technically enrolled as a student I was more in Llamas County than in school.

IN: And what were your initial impressions in working in Llamas County?

RS: Well, it was a real introduction for me to account a rule of poverty that I had not been accustomed to even growing up in the South. Um, it was the first time I understood the sheer danger of being in an environment where people would kill you. And so for me it was an familiar environment, in the sense that, you know, I was right there in the black community and I felt very at home in the community. But there were all these things around me that one had to keep one's eye on. So for me it meant growing an eye in the back of one's head to protect oneself and so

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that one was always on alert against danger that might come out of the, um...just sort of come out of nowhere. I mean that you could be riding in a car and suddenly, out of nowhere, you'd be followed by carloads of white men and your very life would be right there before you and in the hands of the person who was driving the car. Um, so it was definitely the first time I understood the level of intensity of white hatred against black people.

IN: Oops! I was going to ask you, too, um...Where did you stay during all this---

RS: ---I stayed in the Snicked Freedom House which was next door to the Jacksons. Um, most Snick people who came into the county stayed in that house and um, at other times I stayed with people in the community.

IN: And the Jacksons I take it were really putting on a lot of their own, ah, safety and--

RS: --At risk absolutely, for example, I remember one night before, um, August one night we were all sitting around in the Freedom House and then suddenly the lights went out. And suddenly it became very clear that we were surrounded by people outside of the house and that the question was how do we get out cause if you go out we thought that "Oh God if we go out through the back door we're going to be shot! If we go out through the front door we were going to be shot!" So there was this real sense that anywhere you moved you were under seige and so one simply had to take the best chance with survival and go for it and what we decided is that we would go out the back door and that we would crawl on our bellies until we could get to the Jackson's house and as we were outside in the backyard crawling over to the Jackson's we could hear the men inside the Freedom house. Another time when I was staying with...um...this black woman and and um... while I was

standing a group of white men...um... came looking for me. Now this happened two weeks before Jonathan was murdered so maybe that should have been some signal that.. ah.. but they came to this woman's house looking for me, threatening to kill me but somehow that day we had gotten word that they were asking a lot of questions and I had been moved to another safe house and they didn't find me that night so we constantly lived with that kind of threat of danger.

IN: Now why were they after you; because on the tape you, um, were asked, you mentioned that some fellow came to the window of the the cell, and said to you "When you get out of here your ass is mine".

RS: Yes.

IN: Now why would they be after you?

RS: Because I was a young kid, I was vocal, I flaunted in the face--in some real ways, um, I did not capitulate and I was a very visible presence because I was a female in that community who was not part of that community and I was out there organizing and I was a person who could get large numbers of people to go to mass meetings. And so that drew some attention on me and and because I was a single female in that community by myself doing that kind of organizing in peoples' minds I guess that created a certain stigma in terms of who I was as a person.

IN: I see...It would have been less honourous to them if you were a male, sixteen year old male, doing this?

RS: Depending on what kind of personality I had. If if I were a sixteen male, year old male, very obvious and very visible out there flaunting traditions I think it would have posed some of the same problems...

IN: Same problems. I just didn't know if it was, you know, they had a vision of a woman breaking her role as well as a black breaking role. Well, maybe you could tell us about

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when you first met Jonathan and under what circumstances and how you happened to get involved in Jonathan and you had said something about how Jonathon eventually got down there--

RS: Well, Stokely brought Jonathan into the county and when Jonathan was brought into the county when he came into the county with Stokely there was some real concern...uh...by Bob Mance, Marilyn Mosely, and myself about what it meant to have a white person in the county and what kind of danger that posed not only to the white person but to the residents in the county. So we vigorously opposed having a white person in the county and Jonathan was the first white person to really work in Llamas County and so it was a new experience and so we finally decided that,ah um...that I guess the movement should be a place where people could come and do the work...um...So we agreed that he could come in but it was a bitter, bitter discussion...um...that took awhile to really reconcile. And so when Jonathon came into the county he was introduced to Maryline Mosely and myself, myself and Karl Michael and we were assigned to take them around the county so we took them around and rode around and he had a Volkswagon and we would ride around in that Volkswagon and introduce him to people in that county...um...and as I got to know him, of course my resistance against his being there melted. Um...and I forgot about the danger and just kind of really bonded with him as another worker who was working in the county.

IN: Why did that take place?

RS: Because when you are with someone and you're depending on that person to protect you and you're protecting that person all those spaces of the reservation really break down and and so that the more we were together the more we became a team and that certain kinds of things and that

kind of danger happens when you're a team that forever in some real ways seals you together in that space and in that reality with each other.

IN: How did he see as a role working with you people there? He must have felt a little-

RS: -Well, he was pretty low keyed. I mean, I remember talking a whole lot about...I mean he was not an imposing presence. I mean he was not someone who...um...trampled over community restrictions without any regard for what that meant for people and in some real ways he was very subdued in how he met people and and very friendly...um...but really he didn't impose himself on people and I think that really kind of made it easier to be in that space with him. He kind of took his cue from other people.

IN: Did you get a sense of why he felt he should be there?

RS: I mean I think in those days you accept that if a person is willing to risk their lives for being there for the change it's important to know why they're there but it's something you focus a whole lot of energy on, because in order to be in that space there are whole areas of human beings that you have to take on faith. And and so that the minute someone makes that kind of commitment something happens, and, and, and, and, and so you begin to take that person on faith and, and, and, and I don't think we asked each other those kind of horrid questions. I think a large part of being in the movement was being there on faith.

IN: He was a good reliable person during this time?

RS: Oh, sure. Oh, yeah, I mean he was a good person to work with and at that time, I mean, it was the first time that someone had ever said to me in some real ways at that time I had long braids and and he really used to like my braids and he was the first person who had said to me that I really had nice hair and it was really pretty and that I

should never really, you know, do anything differently with my hair and that's what I really remember a lot about Jonathon. I mean the other thing that I remember about him is a twinkle--I mean he had a real kind of twinkle in his eye and I remember how his--the mouth-- and how when he smiled something happened you know near the lips that was particularly his own...um...and but I really don't feel like that space that opportunity provided any of us an opportunity to really weigh very deep into each other's lives and find out who we really were on other levels beyond the movement level. It-

IN: -I wonder what had attracted Stokely Carl Michael to him-to entice Stokely to bring him into Llamas County?

RS: Well, whenever Stokely articulated it he always said that Jonathan was the one that he thought would be OK in that environment; that he thought that he, um, had a real respect for people and that he was willing to take the risk.

IN: Have you heard that tape that Stokely Carl Michael-um...we have a tape of a lecture he gave in April '66 in Boston and it's a forty-five minute talk about Jonathan and his role and then there he keeps saying Jonathan more than anyone saw deeply beneath the surface of things and he kept saying that over and over and over again. In fact, we have a copy in the car of that speech. Um.. he doesn't explain beyond that exactly but he talks about at some level that Jonathan resinated at the--even--he in fact, he says on the tape he could--Stokely says that Jonathan looked beyond where I could go. I don't know...um... it's almost a mystical thing to hear and so I've listened to it a lot working on it, wondering what Stokely Carl Michael w--well I think we'll have to ask Stokely.

IN: There's something that Jonathan would go beyond the ah the

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ah the surface cause of things and like he had to do more than--

RS: Well.. I think he had-

IN: --get more to change the system. He seemed to think that Jonathan had that kind of vision that the whole system had to change you know. At least that's the sense I got but I don't know if that came out.

RS: I don't really think we had the discussions that would allow me to say that he really...um...thought the whole system needed to be changed but I certainly think that the hair incident is an important statement because that's a statement that's a precursor to black is beautiful and so that it really moved beyond the whole stereotype of ^{wh}shat is beautiful in society and really laid hands on something that that was different and and and the ability to name that thing that was a different beautiful. It was a whole different way at looking at difference, that was very outside of the white norm that said that said that anything is different is something to be afraid of is horrible and repugnant. So if that's what you mean by looking beneath the surface to get to the heart of the thing, yes.

IN: When he made that observation about the hair.

IN: And he really bonded--

RS: Yes.

IN: --to the children--

RS: Right.

IN: --that he met and sort of really befriended them... and ah...we don't really want to bring you through the as we said the Haneville Fort Plaza thing--

IN: No.

IN: --We had quite a bit on that. I was just going to ask you after twenty-five years if you had any different insight on this whole business or not the details so much but

any--just looking back on it if there's anything that's-
 you have to you know take the whole events that transpired
 but what it meant or what it symbolized or anything of that
 nature.

RS: Well certainly after looking at eyes on the prize and
 seeing how every murder took place it was very clear to me,
 much more than it had ever been clear that we were set up
 at that murder was a real set up. And that..um..ah..and
 were let out of jail specifically for someone to be killed.
 Um and that the town and that people who were involved in
 that um had organized things in such a way that they could
 um even remove the you know so um clearly that that that
 was a set up and the other thing I understand very clearly
 is that during that era there was a real war um in the
 South and there was a war where even white men had declared
 was on their own children. Um and um...a lot of people did
 not make it through that war. So the casualties were
 people who were killed but also the casualties were the
 people who went insane. I think we call that--in the
 Vietnam War we called that ah..the sort of war syndrome.
 Umm...I think a lot of people went through that and it was
 a very--because that period really realtered.....the whole
 power relationship not only in the South not only in the
 South but in this country so it was a real challenge to the
 patriarch I mean to the patriarchy and people in the
 patriarchy responded in such a way that indicated that they
 saw a challenge. And anyone who really posed a threat to
 that system was not safe and um... I understand now the
 casualties and the implications of that and and the degree
 tio which young people put their lives and their futures on
 on the line.

IN: We had asked.. ah...the congressman Lewis what he felt was
 behind Tom Coleman's act of lifting up a rifle and pointing

it at you. Um.. it's very hard for us I think to to understand and and and and it's kind of interesting to use the war analogy--is that it?

RS: He was enraged and he saw...um...his whole way of life threatened..um ..and and but I want to be very clear he did not want to share or give up the benefits of the power that he had enjoyed. And so that he responded in a way that he knew how in order to protect that and that was to destroy people who he thought were trying to take that away. And at that point collar didn't mean anything--gender didn't mean anything. It was the materials and the position that needed to be protected. So yes I do think we were in a war!

IN: Um, just a a detail question just to get it on tape. The white man who came to your jail window we weren't clear from the tape---was that supposed to have been Coleman or was that--

IN: -Lancaster, Buxton, Jackson, or Comos-

IN: --somebody

RS: It was one of those guys and I can't remeber now I mean it just kind of I don't remember now.

IN: Yeah. But it was one of the lawmen.

RS: Yes.

IN: Either Coleman or one of the deputies.

RS: Yes. Yes. Yes. And see the other thing that I want to say about that whole time that we were in jail I mean there was a lot of psychological terrorism that went on when we were in jail and um...also that day that we were arrested--that day that we were arrested -- was really...an indication in some real ways of the possibilities of violence because there were um.. unknown faces of whitemen there with guns and any other instrumental weapon they could use whether it was a gun or the top of a garbage can

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surrounding all of the demonstrators and in some real ways you knew at that moment to go to jail was to save your life.

IN: Safest place.

RS: Uh-huh.

IN: In some of the--we found some tapes also from early '66 of ah..rallies and church meetings of Llamas County and there's one of Reverend Willey who's speaking and he says "Now that the white preachers dead we black folks have to take it upon ourselves to change the society--we can't rely on others." It wasn't an attack on Jonathan it was merely a restated fact. And so Bill and I were wondering in the car..not to give Jonathan's death oversignification--

RS: -Right

IN: --Is there some point at which at which the struggle turned towards a... not a more insular but a more ah..

Afro-Americans-have-to-do-it attitude um..I got that impression a little bit from the from the Llamas County um organization meeting tapes that I've listened to which you two might be interested in.

RS: Well, I think that, I don't thi--I think it was a continuum and it was um..it was a process that one goes through in the recognition of a kind of liberation I mean when you talk about the right to vote in a democratic society that's a question of voice. To have the right to speak. And historically wh-what black people had been told in this country that we did not have the right to speak--we had been denied voice. And the other thing that happened was that we-- the dynamics were set up in society where white people spoke for black people so in order to collect one's authentic voice there were two thing's that one needed to do: One needed to speak out for oneself and one needed to be recognized in society as a legitimate spokesperson for

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one's life. Um and so that I think the struggle emerged that that was the second phase of the struggle. The first phase was to get the vote to be able to speak. And then the next question became who should speak for African-Americans. And what did it mean in a white society that African-Americans were not recognized as a legitimate spokesperson for themselves and so that was a political question that was raised that was not directed towards people in in a racist kind of way but it got projected that way but it was really the same kind of question that women raised in a feminine movement in terms of who should speak for women whether or not it was appropriate that men do that. So it was really to me a question that really was dedicated to the whole question of of giving black people voice in this country and really being recognized as being like all other people. And have the capacity to speak for oneself.

IN: Um, could you tell us what you think the impact of knowing Jonathan was?

RS: Well, it changed my life in some real ways. I mean that was a another event that changed my life um.. after Jonathan was killed there were a series of hurendous threats in my life and in my families life. The trial was another experience that um.. showed me that this thing called racism was not only deeply retrenched in the Southern reality but was also part of the Northern reality, too, because at the trial when I got up to testify, um, one of the white bystanders in the crowd actually pulled a knife on me and told me if I testified then he would kill me. And when I reported that to Jon Doore or Casenback or whoever it was in office at the time I mean their attitude was just indigitive of another kind of racism and a disregard for the fact that that my life was indeed in

jepardy and that someone who we had valued whether they valued it or not had been killed.....

IN: I know Nicholas Katzinbeck had said something to the effect that when the decision came in said well that's the price you pay for the jury system.

RS: Well, that was his atti--

IN: (laughter) Uh which was pretty, pretty awful.

RS: I mean I really think that in addition to talking about Jonathan's death what I really feel like I want to talk about a little bit is is the trial. And how his whole um-- how the murder was really dealt with--

IN: ok

RS: --It was very clear that um...white men in the South saw Jonathan's presence as I said earlier as an encroachment on on on thier established order. And that um thier attack was against this character against this person who and I was the focus of the-- I was one of the people that they focused that on but I mean I remember just being horrified at the ways in which his character was attacked I mean talking about um.. In other words the only preacher who would come down to really work with black people would have to be a preacher who was immoral and the only black woman who would work with the white preacher had to be a black woman who was immoral and so in some real ways that was the climate that was set in that Southern courtroom. And it was like a zoo, you know with people eating peanuts and chewing gum and it was just and the witnesses having to wait out in the rain because we were not permitted to enter the courtroom and people caring enough about wanting this man to be convicted that even having gone through that trauma and even after having lost Jonathan we were willing to be there to testify.....

IN: And were you there when the verdict was announced?

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RS: Ah.. I wasn't there- I left the day that I testified. Yes.
But I remember being deeply hurt and horrified and just...
..... insennsed that this man had been found not guilty.

IN: What did you do after ah um that August? Did you continue to work--

RS: I continued to work in the movement spuratically. You know I was kind of in and out of the movement. Um.. I went to Georgia- I worked in the Julian Bond campaign um but I never really made the total commitment to be there everyday. Um,...

IN: By that time there seemed to have been a grass roots organization of Llamos County--

RS: Yes, the Black Panther, Yes.

IN: Yes, that um that was in place that the organization had done your job and they were ready to go on another one.

RS: Uh-Huh. Yes.

IN: If that was your intention I don't know.

RS: Well, snicked was always deeply grounded and the whole notion that people who live in an area should speak for themselves. And a strong people don't need a leader it's only weak people who need people to speak for themselves so I really think that was really part of the snicked way of moving in the world.

IN: Was Jonathan ever a member of snicked to your recollection?

RS: I don't know what it means to be a member of snicked.
I mean people talk about that but I really don't know what it meant to be a member of snicked. Who ever will let them come that's how I saw it and once you were there and did the work you became a member of the snicked. And maybe the people who were most conscious about who was and who was not a part of snicked was of the old order where it becomes institutionalized.

IN: Well, we found Jonathan's NAACP card dating from 1963 and

um were just wondering-- just wondering.

RS: I mean snicked was really a place for young people. And when your that age you really have to understand at that age your not really beholding to any memberships. Your just kind of where the work needs to be done. And those are not the boundaries that you operate from. So I didn't see, I don't see, Jonathan as someone who would be contained by boundaries-who would have been contained by boundaries. Or wouldn't have been with snicked because he did work for NAACP. I mean that was kind of what older people did. You know they kind of wanted to put you in those slots.

IN: We were wondering what Jonathan might do. We understand that he was gonna go back in September to--

RS: Yes.

IN: And he would have put in his last year of school. Now I'm just kind of trying to project Jon Lewis involvement ah, progressive social change movements ah what I suspect he would have himself.

RS: I don't think he would have gone back to school.

IN: Oh, you don't.

RS: No.

IN: --His last year.

RS: No. Uh-huh. I don't think it happens- it happened that way. By that time he had become in some real ways...involved. And and you can say cause I always said I was going to go back to Wincheskihe and I always thought I would. But I wouldn't. The closer you got to leaving You didn't you didn't go. And having been the first white person in the county and having-I just don't think he would have gone back to school.

IN: How about the father Morris role--how does he fit into into that--

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RS: --He's a much-I didn't really know Father Morris in the same way that I knew Jonathan. I mean literally Father Morris came into the county just before the march and there he was. So I really don't feel as if I could speak for him.

IN: He just came down from Chicago.

RS: Yes, um-huh.

IN: I'm just wondering if maybe you could talk a little bit more about how something like that changes you. Like You can't ask Jonathan but you just said you wouldn't go back. Is it--why, why, why I'm not quite sure I understand why he wouldn't go back. Ah, why he couldn't return ah is it that or...

RS: There is an urgency about commitment when you're right in the middle of struggle that makes it very hard to be in an environment where it seems that people are raising irrelevant questions and and there seems to be no relationship between the urgency that you just left and what's going on in that environment. So I I think that those two-- that geography becomes very hard to navigate. And and in some real ways when you-- that that is in that time your vocation cause you wouldn't be there if some part of you didn't believe in being there. So that's-- so large part of who you are is there and to leave that experience is to leave who you are. And the other thing that becomes important is that we were a a a group of young people who developed community and so in some real ways that was a community that felt more familiar as you struggle with each other than the wall-- then then university that began to even your own family began to feel somewhat outside of that particular reality because you're you know who you talk about. About what you've gone through that summer and and who could really worry about

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going to parties when you knew that there were people who couldn't even eat and and you had friends who were getting killed and and so that all of that seemed a bit irrelevant and not serious enough and so that I think it was it would have been very hard and once you've had once you've questioned this society and you've found that it's knocking it's kind of hard you can't go back andd pretend that it's not. And so once that you've raised moral questions about human existence the brain doesn't stop. Everything then becomes a question. One's whole philosophical space in life becomes a questioning space and I just don't think he he could have stood in that space and gone back to school and said ok I'm going to graduate now and none of this is happening in the world. It just it didn't happen-- I don't think that could have happened. Or he he would have been there in that kind of danger. Now I know that a lot of people would have liked to say that to demist people's level of commitment by saying that people came because they were there for this and that reason. But what I want to day is that people might of come for many reasons but everybody in some real ways however that manifested itself came because they were committed. It took commitment to be in that environment on a daily basis.

IN: I guess it did. Do you have any last memories of of of a particular memory you'd like to leave us with about Jonathan. Any special thing ah that really stands out um...

RS: I have a thing that really stands out is is ah, the smiling and twinkling eyes and how whenever I looked in Jonathan's eyes I always felt the possibilities of hope. And um some sense of joy just to be in that space doing what we were doing amd for me the smile really meant a lot in an environment that ah on a daily basis was an environment

that was about hopelessness in the sense of all of the restrictions and the racism. Um... I I think that's what I remember most.

IN: Could you tell us a little about what you're doing now? If you feel like it. We were just interested...

RS: Well, I've been teaching and um now president of a national organization that's called Black Women's Voices and and um at the heart of the organization what we do is to um present and nurture the historical in contemporary voices of black women poets, musicians, um intellectuals, activists, and we present intergenerational and um interracial projects um.. that deal with who black women are and have been in the world.

IN: Uh-huh. Is it mostly local projects or nationwide or.....

RS: Local projects and nationwide. We're getting ready to do um a major five day festival from black women around the diasper--

IN: Around--

RS: From around the diasper--from in the world--from Africa--from the Carribean--Yes

IN: Yes, yes. Do you know a woman named Adrean Piper?

RS: Yes, I do.

IN: Do you?

RS: Yes..I don't know her directly but Josephine Whithers is an art historian who is who is my friend who has talked with me about Adrean Piper and I've invited her to one of the homes.

IN: Please tell her hello from me um, last year um Adrean Piper had called me up because we had shown a 40th anniversary in Keene, Nh of a film called Lost Boundaries.

RS: Uh-huh.

IN: Um...Do you suscribe to the Washington Post to get it?

RS: I I get it.

IN: Do you remember on the style section....a long article on Tuesday, the 25th of July last year, there was a long article about this Doctor Johnston who had moved to a small town in New Hampshire who ah asked for white--he and his wife and four children and then tried to join the um...

RS: Oh yes..right. Right.

IN: They discovered he was in a black fraternity at University of Chicago Medical School. Well, that was about a man who lived in Keene just around the corner from us.

RS: Um-huh.

IN: And his story was turned into a book called Lost Boundaries that was printed in The Readers Digest and then later became a big celebrate by a man named W. L. White who um

Ruby Sales continued.

Larry: who wrote and owned the Emporia Gazette, in Kansas, and then it was turned into a film, by Louis De Rochemont, in 1949, then it won a Cannes Film Festival Award, and was on New York Times Ten Best Film List, and here it was about a race, racial incident in Keene, New Hampshire. So we, ah, called Donald Bogle who wrote a book--

Ruby: I know him; Coons, etc, yeah.

Larry: and he agreed to come up, and we invited, stars, who were in the film, members of the Johnston family, because I met the Johnstons a year before, when Dr. Johnston had died. And we had about 1500 people over the course of a week come to see a film that no one had heard of before, and um, it made an article in the Washington Post, NPR. Anyway, Adrian Piper called me up, the day after the NPR announcement, on the radio, and said, "I want to thank you for putting that film on, Lost Boundaries, I've heard about it, ever since I was a child, but I never had a chance to see it. So I ended up sending her a copy of it. And I said, "Why are you interested?" She said, "Well, I'm part African-American, and I've had the same problem that Dr. Johnston had all of his life, and it's just interesting to hear one of the archetypal stories of an American family that has gone through that. So, I've called her up a couple times since, Ruby: Yeah, she's moving, actually, to New England.

L: Is she?

Ruby: Yeah, she's going to be at Smith, I think.

L: I think she's a wonderful artist; she sent me a booklet of her art.

Ruby: She's incredible, yeah.

L: So, I just mention that, and it's interesting that you would know her.

Bill: Do you mind trying to film a couple of things, or is it going to make you too nervous?

Ruby: It's going to make me too nervous, but--what do you guys want?

L: Well, I'd like to use your bathroom first, because I'm already nervous.

B: Well, you know, I thought--

Ruby: I can't answer this question, but if I were you guys, in looking for Jonathan's life, I would, I mean, I don't know how you find out, how he got from that school to Lowndes County; I mean, what went on in--when I talk about my transformation at the march, at the Tuskegee March, that was the moment that something happened, that forever changed my life. Was there any such moment for Jonathan?

Bill: That's what we're trying to find out. That's the big question. That's what the film's about.

L: We describe our film with that question. And we haven't found the answer yet.

B: Well, we're getting--

L: We're getting there.

Ruby: I think it was when he was at Harvard, and he had the

episode. I think that-- I don't think you go through that. Didn't he get sick at Harvard?

B: He went to Harvard, on a Danforth and a Woodrow Wilson. In literature, and he lasted until April, and then--he was always seeking out an identity for himself.

Ruby: That's right.

B: And --very confused about what to do with his life, and--his father had died, a few years back, and he hadn't really grieved over that. And during that year at Harvard, 61, 62, his sister was having all kinds of problems. The father had gone through a terrible death, had a kidney problem, a long ordeal, and his sister was having personal problems; the mother was having financial problems. So it was really a bad time for him, and he had, he was losing his faith, religious faith, and supposedly he went into a church, in Cambridge, and had this kind of religious conversion.

But then we talked to other people, a minister who was chaplain at Cambridge, and he thinks it was the movement, it was indeed--his baptism was moving from Lexington, Virginia, VMI, and what all that stood for, which was repression and denial, and then being thrown into the cauldron of Cambridge and liberalism and radicalism, and doubt and re-examination. So maybe, he discovered a new language then, too.

Ruby: I think that would probably be accurate. I mean, and I think that --but I also think maybe something at Harvard-- cause I think in some real ways the movement was a calling, it was an evangelical calling, it was being a part--I mean, in some real ways one had to be religious, whether the rhetoric was political rhetoric or whether you know it came from that you know, that place?

B: Now how does that work. I mean, that's the name of our film, "Here I Am, Send Me."

Ruby: Right, well, I think that's what being in the movement --it came out of that -- you had to be-- I mean, it, it involved a kind of calling. That's why some people were there, and some people didn't come.

B: (laughs)

R: I mean, seriously, it was about having a calling.

B: And you're using that word in a religious sense?

Ruby: In a religious way. Because the rhetoric, I mean, the kind of belief that's involved in believing in the rhetoric that the very spirituality that one invests in that process, that one replaces religion for that kind of community; and, it's --there is an evangelical-- any popular movement has within in the evangelical kind of flavor.

B: I'm not sure--I'm trying to understand this-- he's religious before this, you're religious before this, but yet, it's a religious, experience that takes you from one religion into another kind of religion.

R: Right.

B: Now, how does that work? I mean, what---?

Ruby: Because, I think that one is in search of oneself, and so that one suddenly looks at one's life and says, "Who am I, within the context of all that has been given me, about

who I am?" And I suspect that people who were there in the movement felt that what they had been given did not complete who they were. And so that one was in that space, looking for more information about who one--whether you were a black person, wanting to, sort of, be, you know, sort of --that was a way of, as a black person, working in the movement was a way of discovering one's historical, as well as one's collective self. For a white man, from Harvard, from Cambridge, to be in the movement, it had to be a white man who in some real ways moved against the grain of the society, who do not see himself-- who do not --with the information that he had about who he was to be in the world, didn't compute, with who he felt himself to be. So in some real ways it was an odyssey. It wasn't just about the liberation of people that you were working with; it wasn't that antithetical kind of process, it was a kind of, simultaneous liberation for yourself, too.

B: I think that's the kin of dyn--it's a very complex --

Ruby: It's very --it's, yeah, and

Bill: For me, it is, I'm trying to understand that.

L: And that fits in with some other things ---

(End of side A)

side B

Bill: Well, she left, too.

L: She did leave.

Bill: And I think when she came down, she came down in large part, I don't want to speak for her, but, at least, to some degree, to join Jonathan.

L: She had very strong feelings for him.

B: She had strong feelings for him.

L: Which, she's talked about.

B: Well, I'd like to try and film, I don't know, try and film a few things, like that piece that we just did of trying to understand that. And then, something, I thought maybe, ah, the contrast between the war that was going on and then Jonathan's own personal identity, ah, for you as, the hair, you know, what he brought to the war in terms of hope and smiles and that kind of stuff might be kind of interesting to try and get at, if you thought that that was a good ----

R: I think it's a good thing, the only hesitation I have about it is how that gets played off, because the thing with films like Mississippi Burning, and the remark that the minister made, I mean I don't think it really gives full expression to the ways in which black people were very much involved, in changing their lives. And that it gives an impression of people kind of, sat back and let abolitionists from the North --and so that I have some real fundamental issues with that, it's not--it's cause I was from the South, Bernice was from the South, Bob was from the South, all of us were first generation black children, first generation of middle class parents, urban parents who had moved from the

rural south, to the urban south, and we were in some real ways the first affluent generation, who had been told in life that we had some real leadership role. And because we had been reared in environments that encouraged that, when we suddenly woke up in the morning and realized that only were we not to be leaders, but we were not even to be walking into certain doors. It was a natural kind of struggle. What we did in some real ways evolved out of a certain way in which we had been taught who we were in the world. And so, I, I think Jonathan brought smiles, but I also-- I don't want to put that in opposition, I don't want to seem as if we didn't have smiles. I mean, I don't know, how, yeah--

B: No, I meant not you people, but the others--I would put him in opposition to the other whites that you were looking at, like --in a strange way. That somehow you were in the midst of this war,

R: Right.

B: I don't know if I heard you right, this terrible war. And, I don't know if I heard you correctly, but --

R:--and you look at someone's eyes, and there's a twinkle in the eye, and that breaks up the whole day. I mean, it gives you something to really believe in.

B" Yeah, that's what I'm trying to get at.

Ruby: You're riding in a car with someone, and that you know your life is in danger, but that person is cracking jokes and you're laughing, and suddenly the space seems bearable. That was really important I think.

Bill: Would you mind --

Ruby: OK, sure.

L: You know, we are aware of being a couple of white guys making a film about a white guy who went down to the south, and we don't want to give the impression that we went down to save--I mean, we're real cautious of that, I, know, I think, is that what you're saying?

Ruby: Yeah, because I think in all fairness to Jonathan's spirit, I don't know what he wrote in his letters, or how he articulated his role to white people, but I do know what I saw is that he was someone who didn't impose himself on the environment. And that's really important, that the spirit of the film really reflects that, that he always stepped aside and let the people who needed to be where they needed to be, **be there**. And what you always knew about Jonathan is that you could trust him to do that, you could trust him to do the right thing. So you didn't mind being in a car with him, because you knew he was not going to jump out and do something stupid. Because of some ego need to be out there. So that's what I mean about --he had that kind of center, that was really important, he didn't need to kind of, um, showcase, you know, if you needed for him to be in the background, he would be in the background; if you needed for him to be out there, he would be out there. I mean, he was really, in some real ways, somebody who was adaptable, and flexible.

L: See, no one said that to us yet, I mean, so that would be it would be quite an addition to the film. Then we could just let it go at that.

Ruby: OK, sure.

Jill: --find that he was that way, was one of the things that brought him down. He didn't feel the need to be ---to the white male patriarchy. Otherwise he wouldn't be down there. In a real aggressive, egocentric --

B: In one writing he said--he confesses that he might have felt that way, initially, when he went down there, and then he said he got rid of his "Yankee messianism." That that went away kind of quickly, for, and he was happy about that.

L: That journey you described from a privileged, white Yankee Protestant son of a doctor situation, to, what he did was one we're trying to figure out.

B: Yeah.

L: And I think we are closing in on it. We're starting to this--Schneider helped a lot.

B: Yeah. He was good about that. Schneider was kind of interesting from the same world --

L: Really--Harvard, Yale, --

B: He went to the march, and he went back.

L: Right. And he admitted it.

B: So he admitted it. So he said, "Well, why, why is it you went back and," you know--?

L: So what's he doing now? He's got 25 patients that are paying him a fortune to be psychoanalyzed. (all laugh)

So, he, ah, and he's looking forward to retirement, so he, he didn't stay in the struggle.

B: Do you think Bob Zellner would be a good person for us to speak to?

R: Well you know Bob Zellner was another generation, and um, he didn't have a whole lot to do with Lowndes County, actually. I don't know if he knew Jonathan. But, by the time Lowndes County began to happen, I don't think Bob Zellner--he was in Atlanta--by then he had become a bureaucrat, a SNCC bureaucrat.

B: OK, thanks.

Ruby: He was not a field hand, it was--you know. The longer you were in SNCC the more you became the old guard, and the new people were the sort of new guard, so Jonathan was new guard. I was new guard, I mean, I was the new crop of SNCC leaders, and each generation was a little bit more evolved than the next, I mean, the first generation started out really being religious integrationists, and by the time it got to the Tuskegee movement, we bordered on being integrationist, and Pan-Africanist, and that second, Phil Hutchins, generation, after SNCC, they were in fact the real Pan-African Nationalists. I was still some part, integrationist. So was Stokely, by the way, when Jonathan came into Lowndes County. I think Stokely is the one who's been really misnamed and misread by history. Because, toward me, he was one of the most gentle men I've ever met in my life. And a very complex human being, with tremendous

capacity of emotional ranges. And I think part of what he always did was to protect that emotional range by always making himself tougher than what he really was. And a lot of that was bravado.

L: He was a spell-binding speaker on that tape. Wonderful.

R: So I'm not shocked that Stokely might --I mean, I think there are some people who would want to look at Jonathan's relationship with Stokely and sort of, maybe argue some pragmatic truce that Jonathan and St--that Stokely arrived at; but if you really know Stokely, and his environment with his family, as being the favorite son, that people gloated around, and sort of having a kind of generous heart, even in the height of black power, he was still someone who couldn't let white friends go, because there was a p--that he had gone to Bronx High School of Science with, so it was not surprising to me that Stokely would have brought Jonathan to the county. That did not seem anything out of the ordinary, if you knew Stokely in those days.

L: You went to the funeral, didn't you, Stokely did, and many other people as well.

R: Yes, uh, huh.

L: Emily told us--Jonathan's sister--that at a get-together at the house, after the funeral, Stokely hovered in the background, didn't say anything, and someone asked him if he had anything to say, and he said, "Jonathan taught me how to love." That's Emily's recollection. That's an amazing thing to say. Certainly doesn't come up on the tape, of April 66.

B: No.

R: Well, by then he had collected himself, you know, and --but I think that all of us went to that funeral feeling very devastated, very guilty, because someone gets killed, even if you didn't do it, you feel badly and you feel guilty, you replay that moment a hundred times in your mind. And you also for someone like me, where your very life was contingent upon someone, you know, you kind of go through this whole thing of, "Worthy? Am I worthy of that kind of sacrifice?" Um, one just doesn't walk away from that moment and file it away. It's something that you play out in your mind for every day of your life, even in adulthood, because it sort of informs the kind of decisions that you make and, and one doesn't come out of that battlefield and suddenly go back into the world and be a, an ordinary human being who goes to work from 9 to 5; it just--so that's why I'm--I know Jonathan wouldn't have been able to do that. Because it has been a process that has taken me until, you know, four years ago, to just kind of get back into the routine of life. I mean, I went from, from the movement, to Manhattanville College, which if you know about Manhattanville, and then from Manhattanville to Princeton, you know, without in some real ways ever catching a breath.

L:: Now you received a Ph.D in American, was it American Studies?

Ruby: American History.

L: At Princeton?

Ruby: Um-hum.

L: Then you went to the University of Maryland?

R: Um-hum.

L: I read your article, in the Women's Review of Books; in fact, that's how I got in touch with you, I didn't know where you were.

R: I see Jonathan as a kind of, as I think about it, a different kind of white person. Than the ones who had come down earlier, I think. And the key to that I think is how he entered the environment. How he came to Lowndes County, was really very significant. In terms of the role that he played.

B: Well, maybe we can just try and catch that. We've got a lot of your audio; we just, like to get a little visual.

(laughs) So maybe we can just ask you that.

L: I'm almost ready. Let me just get a light reading here.

B: How was Princeton, by the way, for a black woman to attend?

R: Well, Manhattanville had somewhat prepared me for Princeton. And, because I had done a lot of the theoretical scrutiny of and understood class, and things like that pretty well. It wasn't as bad as it could have been, but it was still very bad. It was vey bad, but not as bad as it could have been.

B: I'm from very much a working class kind of family, and Princeton scares me. Ah, I wouldn't feel right, I mean, though I went through academia myself, it's just a world that seems sort of alien to me. So I imagine it, a lot of people have those kinds of feelings.

L: There's a book, South End Press out of Boston, about, the children of blue collar families who, end up teaching in college, and how they end up teaching in college, and are often teaching the children of blue-collar families. Bill and I fall into that pattern. I'm just setting things up here. Is there any particular way you'd like me to shoot this, a head shot, or ah, fuller, that dress is so colorful; I think it's great. I mean--

Ruby: So when do you think this documentary will air--?

Bill: Our intent is to get all the shooting done before the summer ends, because it's really difficult for us to get around once the semester, next semester starts. And then we spend a year pretty much structuring it and editing it. And trying to get enough money to get some archival footage, flesh it out. So we'd like to be done next summer.

L: We found a great interview with Coleman, a year after the trial.

R: Oh, goodness, what did he say?

L: It was never aired. Coleman says, John Hart of CBS said, "Mr. Coleman, would you do it again, what you did a year ago?"

R: He said yes.

L: He said yessir, I would. This was a technicolor, sound interview, and I see why it didn't air. So when Hart asked him why, Coleman said, "Well, sir, guys like Daniels came

down and changed the south." He said, "Before Jonathan came down, our nigras down here were good nigras, and people like him came down and made them bad nigras." And he was a man embattled, just like you said. It's a very short interview, but, I think it would be an instructive --unless you disagree, we're thinking about putting it in the film. I mean, that says, that says it all.

Ruby: I think it says it all.

L: I mean, he just-- it was a tragic, I mean I think he saw himself as a tragic figure.

Ruby: Yeah.

L: I'm all set.

B: OK, so we're just going to ask you this question of environment and, how Jon as a particular person was able to adapt to that kind of environment. That kind of set him off, as you were saying, from other whites who might have come down and tried to enter the movement. (BEEP)

What was it about Jonathan that allowed him to do this?

Ruby: I think Jonathan had a very, had a very unique quality of having a tremendous respect for the environment that he was in, and he was someone who did not come into the environment trampling over customs and traditions and --so he had about him, the way he moved in the environment, said to people, that he was someone who respected where he was standing, and that people that he was standing with. And so that, the other thing that made him a good person to just be with every day, as we moved from place to place in the county, was that he was a very caring person, and that caring was manifested in his eyes that sparkled whenever he would smile, and a kind of smile around the mouth, and for me, that was really very, very important, in situations where we were constantly under terror and one was afraid to relax, in some real ways, I could really say that he brought me a kind of joy. And made me laugh, you know, and made me smile. It sort of broke up, the kind of tension that we felt.

B: OK, thank you, Cut.

L: Thanks.

B: OK, thanks.

B: You seem pretty relaxed.

R: But that's hard, going back over that whole--

B: Yeah. Father Ouellet, I don't know if you knew him or not, but, he was the Catholic priest at St. Elizabeth's in Selma, the all-black --one was black--two Catholic churches then. And he told us, he hadn't granted an interview to anybody, and it sounded like part of it was he didn't want to go through that all again. We spent two hours with him, and we were both so moved by it. Because he was seemingly saying things that he had kept inside that you say for so long that hadn't tried to --in fact, seemed to be trying to keep it within as you say. It was, I mean, we're learning an awful lot, doing this, and ah, some of these people that were involved is,---

Terry: "There are parallels with a lot of war veterans, it's really, ah, ---

Bill: Yeah; we're getting a lot of that. We were just saying that we're probably going to film the Vietnam Memorial; we already filmed the ah, the New Civil Rights Monument in Montgomery, that was dedicated, they're both by Maya --

L: Maya Lin.

B: Maya Lin. We might be starting to see that as a kind of theme, of the film.

R: Did Jonathan's family ever reconcile themselves to his death?

L: We think the mother went a little bit insane.

R: Yeah, I had the sense that she was never going to get over that.

L: She became a pack rat, and saved Jonathan memorabilia, so that a dumpster had to come up to the house and--when she died, and take it all away. She became enshrined, in her mind, someplace.

B: She began to live like Jonathan. She became--she moved from being a kind of Doctor's wife, in the old sense of that word, social kind of woman,

L: Bridge every Monday night, noblesse oblige.

B: --to for her must have been, ah, social activism.

Anti-war movement, ecumenical movements, ah, and she had to support herself so she had to go to work. So in some ways, um, she had a very tough time, she never really got over it. (phone rings). But in another way, I think that kind of changed her whole life. In some significant ways. (phone rings).

Ruby: Now did she know the guy who was treasurer of the, that knew Jonathan---in Boston? (end of tape)