

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS
Program Director, SNCC
Interviewed by Trey Ellis
May 11, 2017
Total Running Time: 2 hours 57 minutes

00:00:00:00 TREY ELLIS:
Thank you again so far- inviting us into your home and tearing it up a little bit. We'll put it back, I promise.

CLEVELAND SELLERS:
Yes.

TREY ELLIS:
Can you talk about the first time you met Martin Luther King, just to kind of paint a picture, this is really going to be a conversation of like, telling stories, visuals, stories with dialogue and sort of memories of what it was like.

00:00:20:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:
Yes, the first time I met Doctor King was in nineteen fifty-eight and he had come to South Carolina, talk about Montgomery and the civil rights movement and those kinds of things at Trinity United Methodist Church. And Trinity United Church was the central point for the movement in Orangeburg and with the students at South Carolina State College and Claflin College. And we were all invited, young people who were involved in the NAACP youth efforts, to come over to see and meet Doctor King. I was real young then and so I was, you know, impressionable, but not really making a contact that Doctor King would know on a real and personal basis at that particular time. The, the time that I actually came into his, his presence and

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

consciousness is probably in, in- during the Selma to Montgomery march in which I was in Mississippi at that time, but I was asked to come from Mississippi to Selma after the Bloody Sunday and John had gotten a concussion and was suffering from trauma to the head.

00:01:47:00 And when I came, I was assigned to the- to the duties of being a logistical person for the march as we strategized on when we were going to go out and how soon it would be before we actually got involved and engaged in the Selma to Montgomery march. SNCC had decided earlier that it was- it was kind of done with marches and John decided that he was going to, based on his own consciousness and, and being a native Alabamian, that he was going to march anyhow. And we had a, a, a kind of philosophy in the organization that whenever one of our people was injured or hurt or was, was done in like John was, that we would respond and we would continue their project or program. So, we had about twenty people out of Mississippi that drove over the afternoon after we found out that John was injured and airlifted out to, I think, Boston, that we, we, we drove over about a two, two and half hour, three hour drive, and the next day we were on the ground ready to help with Doctor King and SCLC strategize about how we would go forward.

00:03:24:00 TREY ELLIS:
And what was your feeling when you first- like, coming from, from SNCC to SCLC, meeting King, what was your attitude towards him as the sort of leader of this other movement and just even personally, what was your- what was your impression of him?

00:03:38:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:
Well, I always had a kind of warm feeling for him. He was a southerner, he had been around, he was one of the icons, one of the people that I looked up to, and so that was the basis upon which we actually met. And we had some strategy sessions during Selma in which we, we would discuss the, the- what was unfolding in terms of the march, the route, when we were going to march and, and those kinds of things.

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

And then there was that injunction. And SNCC had a kind of position that those kinds of injunctions, we would generally violate those kind of injunctions to raise the political consciousness and awareness of, of the people in those communities in which those things happened. And there would begin to be a little bit of, of change in how we- how we related at that point, it, it- and what I might say that might clarify that a little bit is, is that we, we, we operated on different tactics and, and we believed that it was very important to organize, that was our- what we had learned over our experiences in Mississippi with the building of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the challenge to the Democratic party to open up for minorities and women in the Democratic party in nineteen sixty-four with the Mississippi Summer Project.

00:05:11:00 But we also had concluded that it was very important to, to, to learn for SNCC, organizing skills so that we could go into a community and empower that community or allow that community to become empowered so it could take over developing the strategies and tactics that would, would gain control of their- so that those communities could gain control of their own destiny. So, we, we just thought that it was better for us as we saw a changing movement tactically that we, we, we would- we would focus on organizing as opposed to mobilizing. SCLC and Doctor King were involved in mobilizing communities and they would mobilize them for a particular goal, so they would ratchet up the kind of pressure- political pressure and economic pressure on the target- well, not just- Birmingham, Albany or some other area, and that you had some very defined short-term goals that you were trying to achieve and that you would- you would reach that.

00:06:28:00 So that- there were little differences and that was exacerbated by I think the position of how you treat the injunction going forward. SNCC had worked with SCLC in Albany, Georgia and along with Doctor King and we supported the efforts in Birmingham with, with the Birmingham Project C, Project Confrontation. And so, we had began to develop some dialogue with, with Doctor King. I had also seen and heard Doctor King speak in Atlantic City for the challenge to the Democratic Party and at that point he was supporting the efforts to accept the compromise that grew

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

out of that challenge to include two representatives from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, but my, my, my relationship was through all of these various and sundry kinds of experiences and later it would become much deeper and, and more passionate as, as we continued to, to discuss difference in tactics in the movement and assessment of all those things and the rest of it.

00:07:57:00 So, it started out in Selma where we actually come together face to face and we actually define who we are each. And I always was of the opinion that people who were involved in the movement were all equal, there was no hierarchy and SNCC certainly fought that kind of, of, of position or posture throughout its history. And so, you know, you would just walk up and talk with a person like Doctor King and, and he was very amenable to that kind of relationship. So, Selma was the beginning and that was the kind of first time we kind of shook hands and, and agreed to disagree sometimes. And-, but the most important thing was, was that my role at that time was to make sure that the march continued in Selma to Montgomery. Some of the others in SNCC decided that they were going to start another campaign in Montgomery and I stuck with the overall overarching objective that we had in mind. So, I tried to make amends and tried to make sure that we kind of stayed focused on what the organization needed to be focused on, and at the same time allow support for those who were deciding that they we going to go to Montgomery and, and, and start again in Montgomery, the Selma effort, the Selma to Montgomery effort.

00:09:44:00 TREY ELLIS:
Can you talk a little bit about the- what the mood was like between the SCLC and SNCC and was there any kind of sense of- there are a lot of egos there, was there- and generational things, can you talk about a little bit of that friction?

00:10:00:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:
Okay. Things were going very smoothly at the initial stage of that Selma to Montgomery kind of effort. John decided that he was going to be a part of that and ended up leading the first march with Hosea Williams. Hosea Williams was a

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

fantastic organizer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, one of the few organizers that they had, but he had a contingency of people who were pretty good organizers too that worked under his kind of leadership. SNCC had been in Selma from- since about two years prior to the Selma to Montgomery march. Bernard Lafayette was there, Silas Norman was there and Silas Norman was the project director when that happened and so we agreed to share the space and on the assumption we were going to work out whatever kinds of strategies that, that we were supposed to put together and work on in unity.

00:11:14:00 One of the things that we detected very early was, was that there was a working out of strategies along with the Justice Department and we were not notified about that. So, we were kind of left out of the loop and so on that Tuesday, I don't know the exact date, but Tuesday when the march started out, we assumed that the march was going to go straight on through and there was going to be another confrontation, but there was an agreement that you take the march from the church, Brown Chapel, across the bridge to the highway patrol, then you would kneel and say a prayer and turn around. And that was called the "turn around march." Well, that created a lot of anguish, not only on the part of SNCC, but on the part of the clergy and all who assumed that the march was ready to go forward and that they were going to in fact violate the injunction. The agreement on the injunction was, was the federal government was going to- was going to work out through the courts some kind of system to allow the march to go forward, but we were not aware of that, and so people became very upset by that.

00:12:41:00 And so, we then activated a young man by the name of Willie Ricks to come in and start working with young people, the youth, and get them involved and engaged in marching through the city of Selma and then at some point coming into the church group and saying, "Let's go, we're going to march through the police and we're going to march because we have a right to march," and that created some, some animosities between the two organizations. And Doctor King called a meeting and at that meeting he talked specifically about Willie Ricks because he had known Willie Ricks, but the irony is, is that he took it to say that, you know, here was Doctor King

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

and he was calling the shots and that we all needed to you know, follow in footsteps, in lockstep with him. That's when some folk decided, Jim Forman decided to go to Montgomery and start another kind of campaign there in Montgomery marching on the state capitol and beginning to set the tone, so whenever the march got there, they would be coming into a situation where they were not restricted in the kinds of activities they wanted to do.

00:14:18:00 And so, he went on to assure Willie Ricks that he was the- he was Doctor Martin Luther King and you need to- you need to fall in line. Ricks just sat there. He, he, he was like- it was kind of unbelieving that Doctor King was targeting him, but he was sending a message that we are trying to do this march, we, we, we have some guidelines, some parameters that we haven't told you about, but we will still expect you to kind of follow and we'll give you information kind of piecemeal. And that's when the kind of friction came in. And that was, again, basically tactical, it wasn't personal, but Doctor King used Ricks to talk to SNCC because he knew Ricks and he knew Ricks wasn't going to have any particular response to him or anger- anger- an angered response, or a challenge, or any of those kinds of things. So we all said we agree, we gon- we're going to try to work together, and we're going to try to keep this from bubbling up into anything that was major.

00:15:35:00 Well, the press during that time picked up on it, and talked about it, a kind of squirmish- a skirmish between the SNCC people and the SCLC people. The irony is, is that later on, Ricks becomes one of the top communicators between SNCC and Doctor King. He had unf- unf- unchecked access to Doctor King. He could go into his office, walk straight in, go back and talk to Doctor King, and Doctor King developed a tremendous admiration for him, but- so it, it, it, it was probably his perception that Willie Ricks would be the kind of person who would understand what he was trying to do at that particular meeting. And we moved on from there. So that, that, that was a perception that grew out of some of our bumping heads because then Ricks was the person who led those students and they were all over the city. They would get stopped on this street and the police would block it off. And they'd go to another street and they'd block it off and they were just kind of moving around, but

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

through that kind of motion you get people engaged and active, and you also get the students engaged and active. And we had passed a point of talking about how old did you need to be in order for you to be in the movement? You could be whatever age where you understand that you were doing something that was going to be good for mankind, humanity and that it was a part of your core social kind of consciousness being built and developed and we certainly did not want to stymie any of that kind of activity.

00:17:24:00 TREY ELLIS:

I want to jump ahead a little bit to, like, when the- in the north when you get to the Watt's riots and Detroit and the more sort of violent protests. How did King react to that and how did that create- is there another schism between SNCC's response to- and you know you and Stokely Carmichael's response to the northern violence bubbling up. Let's say the Watts riots compared to King and did King overlook something in his nonviolent movement, did he not see that this would happen?

00:17:57:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

Well, I think that we, we were all kind of- kind of caught off guard when you saw the rebellions begin. They started in Harlem and then Philadelphia and then later on- this was in nineteen sixty-four that these first ones kind of got cranked up and then Watts in nineteen sixty-five, which was probably the most massive riots that you had, but what we saw it as, a lot of people who were suffering from the same kind of poverty, the same kind of absence of the right to vote, the same kinds of healthcare, the same kinds of employment opportunities, were in the urban areas and they responded with whatever weapons they could find. And so, what we had to do was we had to change the narrative or try to change the narrative and change it from being a riot to a rebellion. And so SNCC made a conscious effort to do that kind of thing and begin to talk to many of these youngsters who were engaged and to find out exactly what their concerns were. Poor schools, like I said, healthcare was terrible and, and the irony is, is that in two thousand seventeen, two thousand sixteen, it hasn't changed

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

that much. The inner cities were the same as the rural south, which is still poor, still have and don't want to have any better healthcare than they had at that particular time.

00:19:37:00 So, our position was, let's go in and work with those kinds of folk and that began to creep into the organization and I think it began to creep into SCLC, but the one thing that you, you got whipped with is, anytime anybody threw anything, a rock, a bottle, or whatever it was, they saw that as a riot and people being out of control and not concerned about the real issues. They were concerned about being destructive. So, anything that smacked at looking like it was going to end up being a violent kind of process, a tactic, a strategy, then- and that was from the person who was looking at its perspective, not the people who were engaged, but the brutality, the police brutality in the urban areas just forced that issue, just forced that issue, just forced that issue, almost like you have with the police shootings that have become rampant in- across the United States.

00:20:47:00 So, we tried to harness that and we tried to respond to that. We did have two organizers that went into- one went to Columbus, Ohio, Ivanhoe Donaldson and Winke- William Hall went to Harlem and began to work on that. And then we began to work with- in Newark with Amiri Baraka, and- what's his name, I'm trying to think of the SDS- Tom Hayden was in, in a project in Newark. And so we, we kind of collected that information because we understood that the movement was a changing phenomenon and it would go through phases as we saw with the sit-in's, public accommodations testing, and nonviolent direct action. We saw it with the freedom rides, we saw it move from that public accommodation testing to voter registration and then we saw it move from that to empowerment and it kept developing as it went along. And as it had successes it would change, the tactics would have to change and we were, we were beginning to talk seriously about coming up with a, a kind of philosophy that would bring people together based on that kind of philosophy and ideology. And so we were working on that to- trying learn as much as we possibly could, and the rest of it.

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

00:22:27:00 I think SCLC was, was probably looking at it at the same time, but they were probably not looking at the depth of it and looking at the people who were engaged. You know, you can fall into the trap very easily of saying that you- it's okay to throw the baby out with the wash, and we thought that it was important to try to salvage that energy, salvage that talent in a lot of instances, salvage that humanity by finding ways in which we could actually develop tactics and strategies that could be employed and harness all this negative energy and those kinds of things or that negative energy. So, we continued to work along with SCLC in our effort to, to work through that. And then it came to Atlanta and that's when I think that it became an issue that we both had an opportunity to work on. I think SCLC took the position that we want to tamper it down. And ours was that we wanted to let the people know that there might be some other ways in which you can do this thing, but we're not going to condemn you for using what you have. And we used to have a kind of saying in the movement that "if you couldn't do anything, spit." You had to do something. If you didn't, you lose- you lose your objectivity, you lose that, that, that consciousness, you lose yourself in not being able to do anything at all. And then you're beaten and you won't have a chance to be successful, but we continued to struggle through that together.

00:24:21:00 But still, there- there are no real, you know, kind of rifts. Maybe Doctor King would say something like, "Stokely, you know you're not supposed to be getting arrested in Atlanta, Georgia." And Stokely would say, "Oh, yeah, I'm going to get arrested wherever I am, wherever there's segregation and there's immorality and those kinds of things, I am going to- unjust laws, I am going to protest and I'm going to protest all over, wherever it is, it don't matter, even if it's in Atlanta, Georgia, the home of both the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee." So, we had that kind of relationship where we would go back and forth. And we also, for the purpose of getting people to understand how we related and communicated with each other, we tried to create that kind of comedic kind of gesturing around in the movement. It was so serious and we were so young that it was better to tell how somebody, you know, jumped out the window, and ran

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

down the street and tried to keep from getting arrested and he got caught anyhow, and you're just too slow, that's your problem. Now, when we make you faster, then we'll bring you back in, but right Now, you're going to have to sit on the side lines 'cause you're too slow to do the work that we're trying to do, but it was that effort that you have when you, you have to, you have to make it comical in order for it to go well.

00:25:52:00 And we used to have names that we used to call Doctor King. We used to say "De Lord," but we'd say it in front of him. It wasn't, it wasn't an- ani- you know, it wasn't animosity toward him, it was just for us to be able to laugh sometimes when we'd say, "Oh, they're going again, they're getting ready to have another march." And it was- it was like laughter. We understood, but we also understood the seriousness of every action that we took because you could lose your life, you could put somebody else's life in danger. It was an invari- a very important issue that you were trying to raise, so you tried to do that kind of thing.

00:26:32:00 I remember when Doctor King was- we decided on the Mississippi Meredith march, the Black Power march, that we couldn't take the march through Philadelphia, but it was the anniversary of the murder of the civil rights workers there. So, we decided to get maybe ten cars and we were going to take the leadership over and we were actually going to march in Philadelphia, and we did that. And when we were marching, everybody was told that we're going to march up to the courthouse, and we had already decided because the steps of the courthouse was lined with police officers, and so we decided at that point that we didn't want to put Doctor King at the front and say that prayer. So, Abernathy led the march. And we got up to the steps and Doctor Abernathy turned around to the crowd and he was beginning to open up and he said something like, and I'm paraphrasing, I'm not giving the whole thing, but he said something like, you know, "I want to- I want to be able to be here today and memorialize the three victims and I want to ask for redemption for those who- and forgiveness for those who murdered these three young men in Philadelphia, Mississippi." And somebody in the crowd behind him said, "Yeah, and we standing right behind you." And at that point Doctor Aber- Reverend Abernathy's eyes opened

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

and he finished this prayer with the eyes open and then walked down to the group and said, you know, “We need to leave here as fast as we can.”

00:28:32:00 And so, I was not in the car with Abernathy and Doctor King, but on the way back to the car, Doctor King asked Abernathy, Ralph Abernathy, said, you know, “We’re, we’re Baptist ministers.” And he said, “Yes, sir.” And he said, “Now, were you, were you, were you scared when you were up there?” “No, sir.” He said, “Well, that was the first time I’ve seen a Baptist preacher pray with his eyes open.” And everybody kind of fell out, I mean, that was Doctor King’s joke, he was comedic too, he told jokes all the time. The funny part about him telling jokes was, he didn’t have the rhythm for jokes, so they would be all kind of- you know, you say, “Okay, alright, I’m going to laugh, but I’m going to laugh at you telling that joke, I’m not going to laugh at the joke, but I’m going to laugh at you telling that joke.”, but everybody fell out laughing, but we had to get back in those cars and get out of Philadelphia and Neshoba County very quickly and we got back over. And it sounds ironic that you’re in a place Now, where you feel the pressure, you feel the danger and you’re going back to a place where there’s pressure and danger already, but this one feels a lot better than the one that you’re in, so it- that’s the kind of life we lived when we worked and lived in the Alabama’s and Mississippi’s and South Carolina and North Carolina. You, you- there was uncertainty about it.

00:30:03:00 And I must say that, you know, we saw Doctor King as a generational- and SCLC as a generational group above us, they were older than we were and you also have to remember that we were young kids. When I went to Mississippi I was nineteen and there were some people who were working in Mississippi that were as young as sixteen, and fifteen and fourteen years old that worked in projects and was out there trying to get people registered for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and take them down to the polls to vote. Now, just think about it, because a lot of people don’t think- don’t ever think about it, but these young people like myself had to go out and get people to come into harm’s way, so anything can happen to them if they made the effort to go vote, but you had to make them- not make them, but you had to try to plea with them to get them to understand the importance and significance of

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

raising those kinds of questions within, you know, within the kind of a positive political kind of way.

00:31:11:00 And so, the person that you get to go out there could be killed. The person who goes out there, their home could be burned down or the Ku Klux Klan could shoot it up and kill somebody in the house. Those are the kinds of situations that we had to address and we had to deal with. Do you want to be responsible or are you responsible for the people who you put in harm's way? Are you responsible for that? Would they have been killed if they hadn't of participated in that? You can't answer those questions philosophically because you have a mission that you think is important, so important, and it has to do with the future of humanity, the future of mankind, that you want to raise that so that people understand that sometimes you have to stand up and say, "I want to control my own destiny, I want to control my own life. I want to be my own person. I don't want to be owned by anybody."

00:32:13:00 And so, we thought that that was so important principally that those things operated. And I'm just saying that to say that, you know, we were committed principally. We weren't there 'cause it was a lark or something good to do 'cause it had more negatives than it had positives. I mean, you know, you get- your house would get shot in in the summer of nineteen sixty-four. Every single month that the Mississippi Summer Project went on, you had- you had some incident somewhere every day. And we ended up not just having the three murders, but we ended up having six cases of young people getting killed- a total of six during that summer and the three that got killed first were three that were on the projects with us. They were our comrades, our friends, our co-workers, whatever you want to call them, that's who they were and we felt very heavy- had very heavy hearts when they were killed. And we knew almost instantly, within twenty-four hours that they were dead. So again, you're talking about a seventeen, eighteen-year-old have to deal with that. Very similar to what people talked about they had to experience when they went to Vietnam and to war, but I think Doctor King understood, you know, what was going on because he was out there and he experienced some of those things himself.

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

00:33:39:00 TREY ELLIS:

I want to go back Now, just one second when you talked about- just, can you paint the picture, when you would say, you or Stokely, or you would say “De Lord” to King and how he’d respond, can you sort of give us a little bit to paint that picture, like, how would you be talking to him and then call him, you know, pretending that he’s- you know, calling him “De Lord” and then how he-

00:34:00:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

Well, that was- that was because we always had a tremendous amount of respect for Doctor King and humility, that was who we were as an individual. And so, we would put him on a higher- higher status and we that thought that was a kind of cute way to do that kind of thing, that’s, that’s, that’s all it was. And so we would, you know, we’d be sitting around maybe all SNCC’ers and we’d be looking at the news or something, say, “Come here, come here, come in, Da Lord’s on.” And everybody knew who that was and that was a smile, we understood that, but it was not a derogatory kind of term, but people made it to be that kind of thing, but it was kind of uplifting for us because we always had that kind of humility and we always had that kind of respect. And we always saw him as being an invaluable, you know, movement veteran. And that’s what it was,

00:34:55:00 TREY ELLIS:

No, I know, it was a kind of loving- a loving, teasing, but you said- you talked about times when you might’ve said it to him and...

00:35:00:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

Yeah, I mean, if you said it to him, he would just, “Mmmm.” You know, just kind of- you know, but he didn’t- I mean, he didn’t find it offensive in that sense, he would just say, “Oh, there go them SNCC’ers again.” And you know, that’s the way- that’s the way he treated that. But Doctor King had a very good relationship with SNCC

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

during its entire existence and so did SNCC have with Doctor King. Now, I'm not- I can't say that there might have been people- individuals who might've had some conflicts, but in terms of organizationally and knowing what we were engaged in, how serious the matter was, we didn't have a lot of time being upset or distracted. There were a lot of different organizations doing a lot of different things.

00:35:51:00 And what we found was that we had to go much faster because we had done some things that were successful, sixty-four with the sixty-four Civil Rights Bill, we had taken care of public accommodation testing, you didn't have to go back to that you didn't think. Some people went back to it like the students at South Carolina State in nineteen sixty-eight, but we had pretty much moved beyond that. What do you do next? Well, you get people registered to vote. What do you do when you get them registered to vote and where do you, where do you, where do you have them aligning themselves? And what we found with the Miss- with the Democratic Party challenge was that the Democratic Party at that time wanted power over morality, so they allowed the, the- I guess the resolve to go forward. And most of the people from Mississippi said, "We have come too, too far, we work too hard to get a kind of handout like this, and it doesn't represent what we were trying to achieve. So we're going to turn it down and go back." So Doctor King was, was, you know, always engaged in that and that was the kind of thing that we would talk to Doctor King about.

00:37:17:00 TREY ELLIS:

Can we talk about, you know, we'll have a lot of extensive footage, of course, about Stokely Carmichael. Can you talk about your relationship to Stokely and how you met and how he became chairman of SNCC?

00:37:32:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

Stokely Carmichael was a rebel at Howard University when I went to school there as a freshman in nineteen sixty-two, fall of nineteen sixty-two, and I was looking for all of the rebels that I could find and lo and behold what I discovered was there weren't

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

but about ten or eleven at the institution, and so I was able to find them through the Canterbury Society and the Canterbury House in which this organization called Non-Violent Action Group, NAG, was there and all of the SNCC'ers were a part of this NAG group and so they recruited new students that were coming in and we got engaged, and involved, and so that's where I met Stokely. And in nineteen- academic year nineteen sixty-three, nineteen sixty-four, that spring I moved into Stokely's apartment, it might've been in the fall, I moved in with Stokely and we- we were busy organizing in Cambridge Maryland under- if I can't remember her name, she going to kill me, but that's okay, I'll think of it in a minute. But we were working in Cambridge and I was getting a full experience of organizing community in Cambridge. And we ended up trying to block Governor George Wallace who was running for governor I think during that time and, and we all got arrested and that was my first civil rights arrest. And I worked in Cambridge for the- probably the entirety of the- this- the fall and spring of nineteen sixty-three.

00:39:58:00 I also worked in the fall of nineteen sixty-three in August with Stokely through the time of the March on Washington. And so Bayard Rustin, who was a friend of Stokely's, when it was time to get the, the kind of cannon fodder for the march, I mean, those people who would, you know, print programs, and place them on posters, and make sandwiches, and all that kind of stuff, and do the logistical work, and run errands and all those kind of things, he called on several SNCC'ers to do that for him. One of them was Ivanhoe Donaldson and Joyce Ladner and I was one of those people who kind of went in there. Now, Stokely was not in Washington for that, but we had worked on those things up to that time, so he was- he was kind of committed to being there. And then we were able through that process get a lot of the SNCC organizers out of- out of Mississippi and southwest Georgia to the March on Washington, so we were able to give them that kind of experience and we were also able to learn about organizing from Bayard Rustin, who is probably one of the best organizers there is.

00:41:30:00 So, my, my relationship to him was to kind of be an understudy, an underling. When I actually got in SNCC through Ella Baker and Bob Moses, I learned how to arrest

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

the ego and that that was required for SNCC. Although many of those people who were coming in were talkers and very articulate, you learn a certain protocol in SNCC and that was, you talk when you had something to say and when you ran out of it making sense or you ran out of it based on any kind of reading, on any kind of particular philosophy and all, then you needed to quit because they were going to make you quit. So, I was a understudy, underling trying to share some of his pride experiences and at the same time, trying to learn as much as I possibly could 'cause I had generally made a commitment to go to Mississippi for the Mississippi Summer Project and so we organized those people, but that's where we- that's where we got started.

00:42:51:00 But my relationship with Stokely continued. We served as officers of SNCC, he as chairperson and me as the program director, for the next- I guess it was 'til, 'til, 'til we both left the organization in nineteen sixty-eight. And so, I got to know him very well, we were almost like brothers and we, you know, we were engaged in his running for election with- against John Lewis and staying up all night to get that election straightened out and it ended up being that Stokely became the chairman of SNCC and John Lewis was very resentful and left SNCC shortly after that and that created some, some issues along the way also. But I think it was a good change, it was time for that kind of change. We were changing tactics again. I served two terms as program director and during those two terms we were able to go from a position against the war in Vietnam, we were able to, to bring Black Power along with the organizing in Lowndes County, Alabama, we were able to talk about coalitions and alliances with other groups, Cesar Chavez and Bellicose [*phonetic*], Native Americans and Hispanics and Puerto Rico and Africa. And oh, we were able to see our struggles here in America connected to the struggles in Africa and other progressive place where liberation struggles were going on.

00:45:03:00 So, we had a wonderful opportunity together to do all of these kinds of things and so Stokely was, was a very dear friend. He was the godfather of two of my children and Miriam Makeba, his wife during that time, was also a godmother to one of my children. So, it, it was a very beneficial kind of relationship, a long-term relationship

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

and I had an opportunity to speak with him and help organize the end-of-life kind of period for him. You will see that on different occasions during the Black Power period that we met with leaders across black America. And we would share those meetings and we would help develop strategies and try to find resources and try to be correct on issues that we thought were pertinent like trying to define Black Power, trying to get ahead of- and one of the critical pieces was that we knew what Black Power was going to be, but we were overwhelmed by the amount of response we got from the African American community. But we thought that it was important for us to define it, but not define it so it excluded people. We wanted African Americans to come together and find the importance and significance of the principles of the movement and the fact is that they had to secure their own freedom themselves, they had to push through. And a lot of it has to do with having the consciousness and knowing when you had to act in order for you to put that effort into, into play.

00:47:10:00 TREY ELLIS:
Right. To that point, how did the- how did the term first- when was the first time you heard it or you said it or- was there- was it- did a light bulb go off, like Black Power is such a powerful term, but it was a hundred years in the making.

00:47:24:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:
No, it started pretty much after the snafu at the National Democratic Party's convention in which they rejected our moral argument about inclusion and so as a result of that, we figured that we had to move outside and began to organize African Americans around issues that would allow them for retrenchment and to go back in and begin to deal with the issues of who we are and what we have to do, whatever our goals and objectives to get to where we want to be, and in the final analyses what those goals and objectives were.

00:48:16:00 TREY ELLIS:

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

What about using the word black, that just was a revolutionary idea at the time as well?

00:48:22:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

Yes, all of this emerges out of the movement. For an example, people in Mississippi and Alabama said, you know, when they were talking about the war in Vietnam, “Why do we send our sons and daughters over here when in fact we- when in fact we don’t have the right to vote in Mississippi and Alabama?” So, it becomes very clear that they are talking about if you’re going to fight for power, you need to fight for it here. And we also discovered that, again, that black folk had no power to make a dramatic impact unless they were able to come together, unless they were able to understand who they were and that they had to learn that we were not born in a cotton field, that we had a rich history. Where does that history come from? Africa. So, we had to go back and deal with identity, which is how you get to the first phase of that, and that is, we’re black and we need to point that out and we need to accept that and we need to own it. And so that’s where you get the black from, but the power thing was, was that we needed to be empowered to do those kinds of things.

00:49:43:00 Fannie Lou Hamer came a long way, but when she got up and presented her information, there was resistance to that on the part of the Democratic Party, so she could say things and she could have certain kinds of experience, and do certain kinds of struggles, but she was not one of those ones that they were interested in having take those seats. But if she was, she was going to be the only one and she did not- she rejected that notion that there’s a special group of negroes who should be the ones that are negotiating on the behalf of all black people. And so, we, we, we saw it as being important.

00:50:27:00 And when we went to Alabama to organize, you know, the folk in Alabama, this was Stokely’s project, got together to talk about what would be the- what would be the, the symbol. The symbol for the Democratic Party in Alabama was a white rooster that said “White Supremacy Forever.” And, and so they were talking about this symbol. And they went through everything, the donkey, the elephant, you know, and

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

then they got to the Black Panther. And the guy was explaining, it's sleek, it's fearless, you know, it's beautiful, you know. Who is that? That's us. So, they, they named the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, the press did, the Black Panther Party because they were getting ready to talk about how negative it is and self-isolation and self-segregation and all those kinds of things when we were talking about having an open society. But it became very honest and open, that what we had done in Mississippi, what we had done in Alabama, what we had done everywhere in terms of organizing a resistance in the urban city, that the only people that we were impacting were African American communities. That's the reality of it. Because you began to see, you know, as soon as you got through the Great Society programs, you began to see a resistance to that and you began to see opposition growing.

00:52:08:00 I'll give you an example that- just for the purpose of thought and that is, we are still dealing with education in the United States from the Southern Manifesto, which is when all of the white democratic officials who said that they were opposed to the desegregation of the school and talked about overthrowing the Brown versus Board of Education decision, said that we will use every method that was lawful to overturn that effort.

00:52:53:00 And so, we have seen from that time all the way through today, even talking about choice, choice is still an effort made to destroy the public school systems. And there's been every effort made to destroy the public-school system. Who uses the public-school system now? The poor. And so, the educational system is what it is because you don't- you don't have the funding and the resources that are necessary to make the school what it is. And everybody talk about you spend so much money and you don't get any results. Well, if there are low expectations in most of the high schools that have the majority black students in it, painted on the wall so that all the students know that they- they're not expected to learn, but they can learn, for an example when you use athletes, they can learn six books full of plays and remember where they're supposed to be and all of that kind of stuff, they obviously can learn, it's just a matter of teaching them.

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

TREY ELLIS:
Of course.

CLEVELAND SELLERS:
Alright, so, I, I, I digress on that.

00:53:57:00 TREY ELLIS:
No, it's okay, that's wonderful, I just want to jump back to, like, the big moment of, like, you know, when did it become clear with you and Stokely that, that his commitment to nonviolence like first was problematic and then there was a break, if you could walk us through that.

00:54:16:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:
Okay, well, let me start you back with SNCC. SNCC was always a lot different from many of the other organizations. A lot of it had to do with our youthfulness and it also had to do with our experiences. Most of the people in SNCC were not nonviolent in terms of principles and beliefs. They saw nonviolence as a tactic and it was a very important tactic and it- in the public accommodation-testing phase of it, it saved lives and it saved harm to those who were participating in that. And so, it also gave America an opportunity to see what the resistance was like when the press wasn't there, when the news wasn't there, the TV wasn't there. So, we employed it where it was needed, but it was never a way of life for us, and Doctor King actually understood that we didn't- we didn't embrace the nonviolence as he embraced nonviolence as being a preacher. It was a part of the morality to be nonviolent, turn the other cheek and that kind of thing.

00:55:32:00 Well, most people across the south that we were working with, when, you know, you went to Mississippi, a lot of them would have shotguns up near the window and they would say that, "I know you all are nonviolent and if somebody fires in the house, we going to fire back." And they said, "Well, we have a shotgun, a rifle over here for you, but you don't have to take it because we understand that you're nonviolent."

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

But they were willing as a probably a human principle to defend their families and that never left. Nobody, nobody took that away from them and we weren't prepared to take that away from them. So, I think that's where you began to see the whole notion about SNCC and nonviolence. We never were an organization that embraced nonviolence as a principle, as a way of life, okay? And so, it was very easy to change tactics 'cause that's what we saw happening. We were not sitting in at lunch counters in nineteen sixty-six, you know? We weren't riding the bus to open up public transportation operations. We had already taken care of that, not in nineteen sixty-six. And so, we were moving along and we didn't see that as a radical change. But let me probably try to talk a little bit more about how we- how we navigated that shift and that might be helpful and let me also say that- (Cross talk) the light went out.

00:57:01:00 TREY ELLIS:

For those who don't know, can you go back and tell us who is James Meredith and walk us- talk about the, the- set the stage for the March Against Fear and how that came about.

00:57:11:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

Okay, we're, we're talking about nineteen sixty-six shortly after the election of Stokely Carmichael and the others to- Stokely being chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and we left Atlanta and we went around, examined the projects and see what kinds of resources we had, what people were doing and that kind of thing, making an assessment. We were trying to make an assessment of the resources of the organization and see how we could better utilize those resources. So, we were in Pine Bluff, Arkansas when someone came along and told us that James Meredith, who was the person who integrated the University of Mississippi, Ole Miss, had been shot and killed. And so, we- that's all the information they had, they didn't know anything about what was happening next, that kind of thing. And we thought that he had been killed and we were kind of toying with the idea of going to Memphis or what we would do. Then we found out that he wasn't killed, he was shot

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

in the head and he had fell to the ground and that's the picture they had, but he was not killed and that he was in a local hospital there in Memphis. So we left Memphis, headed to- the next day, headed to the- we left Pine Bluff headed to, to Memphis. And it wasn't that far a distance away and when we got there, we found out the hospital and we went by there and at the hospital we ran into Doctor King and later we ran into Floyd McKissick.

00:59:13:00 And Doctor King, head of- president of SCLC, Floyd McKissick, chair of, of the Congress of Racial Equality, CORE. And so, we talked about the march and you know, what needed to happen and all that kind of stuff, but we, we went downstairs in the waiting room and we talked about it and we said that we don't want this march to be interrupted as a result of James Meredith getting shot because his march was a march against fear and he was trying to empower African Americans to, to have that kind of awareness, but at the same time, not being fearful of all the threats that had been taken against them. And so one of the key issues was whether or not James Meredith would allow us to continue the march. And so we went back and James Meredith said he didn't, he didn't have a problem with that, that it sounded okay to him. And so, we said "Well, okay, we have a couple minutes that we can get across the, the, the Tennessee line into Mississippi and what we'll do is we'll just assemble there with a small group of people and we'll march maybe two or three hundred feet, maybe a little bit further than that and say that we have- we have restarted the march, that- that James Meredith had led.

01:00:58:00 After we- after we did that, we decided to come back to Memphis and go to a church rally that was going to be held at Reverend James Lawson's church. James Lawson used to be a SNCC'er, matter of fact he was the person who developed the first principles of the organization and included the nonviolence that, you know, principle in SNCC's statement, original statement of principles. And, and so we went there and we were able to bring him in and we all kind of got a sense of how we were all going to come together and unite and, and go forward with that, and so that's- that's what happened that first night. And then we, we found out that, that Whitney Young and who else- Whitney Young and, and Roy Wilkins were in town, the NAACP and the

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Urban League leaders, and so we decided that we would all go and sit down. And when I'm saying all, we're just talking about primarily those leaders and maybe one or two other members of those organizations. And so, we decided to go and see whether or not we could all agree on how the march should go.

01:02:35:00 And we had a long discussion, back at the Lorrain- Lorraine Motel and we had a special room that we sat in and we talked about that. And we, we talked about having the locals be in control of the march in the sense of publicity and participation and all that. We saw it as an opportunity to have a voter registration drive, and we had mass meetings playing after every march at a local church in that community, and then the next day we'd mobilize people and take them out to the polls to vote. We also had on that night a group called the Deacons for Defense who came in and they wanted to participate. They said they would- they would handle the security, that we wouldn't have to worry about that at all and whatever the local authorities do is another kind of thing, but they would be on the ridges and, and, you know, looking for intruders or those kinds of things late at night and all that kind of stuff. So Stokely said, "Yeah, we'll take that in and we'll introduce that and see where we'll go with that." So, we started discussing this whole operation and we said we didn't want to have a national call for, for, you know, clergy and whites to come from, from the north and both Whitney Young and Roy Wilkins were opposed to that. They wanted to go back to New York and do this big public relations thing and, and generate all this interest and have everybody come in and kind of move the local people kind of out of the way and not have them take ownership of this particular march. They were supposed to be marching against fear, then they need to participate in it, so that was our thinking.

01:04:34:00 We discussed, we went round and round, everybody made their position clear. So I think the SNCC position was that we wanted it to be focused on local people, we didn't want a national call, but let them do and run this march. The second thing was the focus was going to be on voter registration and the mass meetings would be a part of that process. And the third thing was that we wanted the Deacons for Defense to be involved in whatever security activities we needed to have out there. We didn't want to call any militias or any of that kind of stuff. What we wanted to do was we

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

wanted to have people who have done that for civil rights groups before, and they had done that for CORE in Louisiana, provide security. So Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young said that they still thought that in order for you to get the message out, it would be better to go back to New York and have this massive press conference that they were prepared to do the next day and we said no. We said that the focus should be around voter registration. They agreed to that in principle, but they said that you all, CORE and SNCC, don't have the resources and the capability to do that kind of thing. And we said, no, but we could, we could bring in the local people and they would have the resources in order to do that, because the people they needed to communicate with were other Mississippians. We weren't trying to communicate to the world and if the world decided that if this was something that they needed to be involved in.

01:06:14:00 And we didn't- then, you know, we, we kind of was cool to the, to the, to the Selma march so we knew that we were going to have a hard time getting this in to the SNCC central committee, which was the organization that actually coordinated the principles and programs and all that kind of stuff in the organization and so what we did after that was we, we discussed and discussed, discussed and then it came to be obviously a two-two vote on what we should have. The NAACP and Urban League opposed what we were talking about and we supported what we were talking about. And so, it was up to Doctor King, and Doctor King said that, you know, it was a difficult decision, but it needed to be a decision made. And he ended up siding with SNCC and CORE. And he thought that because we had had a tremendous amount of experience there, not that the NAACP didn't have any experience there, but because we had a tremendous amount of experience there, we had just been there in nineteen sixty-four, that we knew the territory, and all that kind of stuff, and CORE was there too in nineteen sixty-four, that we tried to- and we had the local NAACP there, not the national, but the local in nineteen sixty-four.

01:07:55:00 So, he said that he would go along with that and those principles and the question of the deacons, he didn't feel that that would have any impact on his nonviolent philosophy and belief, so they were in and they just- oh, they just objected to that,

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

they got up and stuffed all their stuff in the briefcases and slammed the briefcases and went downstairs and said, “We’re going back to New York,” and we thought that was the end of that, but for us, we had to send Stokely back to- to Atlanta where the central committee was meeting and get them to support what we were trying to do. And they said, “A march? Oh, you’re on your own.” But that wasn’t good enough for us because we knew what we had to do. We had to provide the resources, don’t look to Atlanta for any money or anything like that, but we had a number of people still in Mississippi from nineteen sixty-four and the march coming out of Memphis would have to go through those critical areas, Greenwood which is where Stokely worked in nineteen sixty-four. It would go very close to Holly Springs where I worked in nineteen sixty-four and it had to go through Canton and it had to go into Jackson.

01:09:16:00

So, we figured that we could mobilize people and we could really get people involved in this particular march, not just mobilizing them, but beginning- to begin to have them thinking about what do you do once you get the vote. What do you do once you get registered? And so we recognized that this was an opportune time to educate and mobilize at the same time. So we took that on and Stokely came back and we had authorization to don’t call us. And so we knew what that meant and so we rounded up the resources. I got a lot of my staff people out of- out of Holly Springs. By that time, the staff in Holly Springs were locals from Mississippi who were operating the program, and then they would turn it over to even folk who are from that particular area and keep it moving so that you keep building local leadership and building independent community organizations that could go head on in and address the issues that they face.

01:10:23:00

So, the march started off with the NAACP and the Urban League going in one direction and the rest of us going in another direction and so there was that tension in there. But the thing that was so fascinating about it is, is that we kept Doctor King there for the whole period from when the march started until the march end- ended. And at night he would be at the- he would be one of the speakers. He would be a speaker, Stokely would be a speaker, and the head of CORE was a speaker, McKissick. And during the day we would walk down those blistering hot roads and

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

we had a good time to talk and talk to each other and so I think there was a bonding that took place at this particular march where, you know, we shared things that we wanted to share with SCLC and Doctor King and he shared things with us. But, I mean, we didn't get into very intricate kind of things, but we just talked about what we were doing in Alabama and how we thought that that was important and, and that Stokely was just elected and what are the responsibilities that go along with that. So those are the, those are the kinds of things that we discussed.

01:11:48:00 And you could see that Doctor King had a certain appreciation and humility about the people who came out. This was the first time that many of these folk had ever seen Doctor King in person and he was there. They didn't have the money to go see him, they didn't have the transportation to go see him, but he was walking through their neighborhood, they came, and like in the African traditions they brought stuff. They brought water, they brought from home, you know, big jar, gallon jar of water, just cold water that they brought along. They brought fruits, oranges and apples, bananas and stuff like that so that they could show their appreciation for him coming to them. And they would- they would sometimes just kind of break out of- there would be a line along the side of the road and when he would show up, they would just kind of move in, move in, move in until they had him completely surrounded. And some just wanted to touch him, that's all. Some wanted to do- you know, show their praises and whatever else and he was very- he showed his humility.

01:13:04:00 It was very clear, I mean, and he showed his appreciation and he, he tried to show his love for people who were involved in the movement and how serious it was and that he was fighting for people and, you know, it was like them touching the garment, but he didn't want it to be like that. He did not- he was- he was too humble of a person to, to respond as if, yeah, I'm the king and you are the peasants. He- it wasn't like that at all and he was- he shied away from that kind of thing and, and encouraged people not to, not to do anything, 'cause some people would, you know, try to kneel and all that- 'No, stand up please.'" And he touched all the hands he could touch and he kept moving and they let him out and they went home and had lifelong stories after that to tell about Doctor King coming to Mississippi and how they became

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

empowered as a result of the movement in Mississippi and how they took on Senator Eastland and all of the other racist leaders that you had in Mississippi and changed the state of Mississippi.

01:14:19:00 TREY ELLIS:
How did Stokely feel about this kind of adulation towards King?

01:14:24:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:
Well, he was- he was excited by it. He had known it kind of existed, but he was looking at it in his own eyes. I mean, when we were in Mississippi, people used to refer to- and I'm talking about the SNCC people, they used to refer to us as, rather than civil rights workers or voter registration workers, they would refer to us as Doctor King's brothers or sisters and that's the way, you know, that's the term that they used, an endearing kind of term and now they actually get a chance to see him and you could not believe, you know, older people who for the first time had an opportunity to come up to him and speak to him and say hello and let him say hello to them and that kind of thing. It was just- it was- it was just a memorial kind of event and it was an empowering kind of event too, that they had actually seen and they knew who he was and they felt very good about him being there with them, that they had some essence, they had some significance and that becomes really important when you're trying to organize people who may be poor or people who may be uneducated or people who might have some kind of disadvantage to think that they are looked upon as-, as they're just regular, ordinary citizens and so that- that was it. But Stokely was excited by it.

01:15:52:00 And he also knew that there was a difference between how people responded to him and how people responded to Doctor King. And that wasn't anything to be concerned about because he didn't want that adulation himself. I think he wanted to be able to be articulate and teach as much as he possibly could, but he didn't want people to make him a super hero and clean him up and shine him down. Doctor King was in his straw hat and his sunglasses and his attire for making those treks and at night he

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

would also talk about, you know, how tired he was from walking all day and how exciting it was. And he would go to the church and give his presentation and Stokely would come and he'd give his and so they were competing at times, but talking about the same thing and that is empowering black people. And Doctor King was one of the ones who, who talked more about- more about, you know, in areas where we had the majority, we need to- we need to vote and put in a sheriff or- and, and, and begin to do that in those areas where we can do that kind of thing, use our- our vote to our advantage, you know?

01:17:13:00 And so he was, he was right on target and probably did not know that Black Power would be coming a few stops down the road. But he, he said all the principle pieces to Black Power, how do you empower your community, not only, not only politically, but how you empower your community in terms of culture and identity and all those kinds of things. And so, that became important, how do we standardize and how do we make that history and- and make that identity and who we are and who we are as people and what we want out of this life and what we have already done to make a change or try to make a change in America and we continue to do that kind of thing.

01:18:00:00 TREY ELLIS:
Speaking of the Black Power speech, can you walk us through the- go back a little bit at those- the talks? This is the first time you and Stokely and King are talking and walking through the day. Is there- do you- do you and Stokely have a plan a little bit to sort of talk about, sort of the- unleash this doctrine of Black Power? And sort of lead us up to that, that, that fateful moment when he says that and then afterwards, what's Kings response?

01:18:26:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:
What we were- what we were talking about is, our focus was on mobilizing as many people as we could. We thought that if people had an opportunity to see this, feel this, hear about it, appreciate it, that that would be the key to creating a high level of political consciousness among people in Mississippi. And it was, it made a

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

difference, a significant difference. But we went on to- on down the road and when we got to Greenwood, that's when a set of circumstances happened that kind of triggered the, the, the speech that had Black Power in it come at that particular time. By this time, we also had one of our targeted orators come in. He was the person who could get people to march for, you know, for their birthday, you know, Willie Ricks, now Mukasa. And he was on the stump too and he heard where things were actually going. So, he talked about, you know, Black Power, that's what we, that's what we need to do. So, when we got in Greenwood, Stokely and his crew was- and SNCC'ers were setting up a tent for the group to stay overnight and they had gotten permission to set it up at the school and- the black school, and they rescinded that decision. And so, he was arrested and he was real upset by being arrested and he was arrested in the area that he had been in. He was very popular as an organizer in nineteen sixty-four- summer of nineteen sixty-four and, and part of the fall of nineteen sixty-four before he left Mississippi and went to Alabama.

01:20:35:00 So, Doctor King also was concerned about his arrest. I mean, they were just- this was provocative and, and they're trying to provoke us to do something. And so, when, when Stokely was released, he was released just before he was to go on stage and speak and so the person who, who, who, who I talked about earlier, Willie Ricks, when he got up- when Stokely got up, Willie Ricks kind of introduced him and Willie Ricks was saying, and you know, "What do we want? Black power!" And so he kind of started, set the tone, then Stokely came up and spoke and said that, "Yeah, that's what we're trying to do, you know, we're trying to- Black Power, black political power, black economic power, these are the kinds things that we are trying to do and we are trying to develop models here in the south that we can possibly use in any community that had a majority black population. In many of the urban areas where you didn't have black elected officials, we'll try to deal with that too." So, the Black Power movement kind of got started right there because when Stokely was finished, Stokely went to the front of the stage and said, "What do we want?" And the chant was, "Black Power." And then Willie Ricks got the mic and he just pumped it right up, but it was, "Black Power, Black Power, Black Power." And the folk were

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

cheering and- and they said, “Stokely is back, our hero is here with us and we need to listen to this.”

01:22:25:00 And there was nothing that was said between the leaders, not a thing until it hit the press and the press was saying that this is a march that has turned to nationalism and the narrow nationalism and hatred and all that kind of thing and I’m trying to figure out why they’re doing that kind of thing, But what we were able to do is we were able to kind of put that in the can, move on and when the group went to Canton, that’s when they set up the tent and the police came and, and threw tear gas bombs in the tent and then they started beating people with the rifles and the butts of guns and just putting- spraying tear gas in the face and all that kind of stuff. So that was- that was a pretty tragic kind of event. And Doctor King was in there too so they were- everybody was just trying to get out and get some fresh air and trying to take care of people. People were passing out and all that kind of stuff.

01:23:33:00 So, they were able to do what they couldn’t do on that couple of days before in Greenwood in Canton. And then the march went on to Jackson, but by this time, the news- the kind of news backlash, I guess you would call it, would stir, stir it up so everybody was saying, “That Black Power thing, that’s going to be against whites and that’s violence against whites.” Anytime in our decorum when we talk about black people having power, the assumption is, is that black people want to be violent against white people. You know, I understand where that assumption comes from, it’s a racist assumption that comes every time, and that’s how you can beat down whatever it is that you might be trying to do, be it good, indifferent or what have you, that that kind of discussion comes up.

01:24:42:00 And so, when that discussion came up, SCLC sent some more staffers in and they began to tell Doctor King that, you know, “You don’t, you don’t want to get tied to this Black Power thing, so, you know, kind of slow down on your Black Power stuff. Let Stokely and those kind of do that and we can push them over to the side and then have you kind of be the central person of, of rationale- rationality come forward and be exposed.” But what we did was we decided that we wanted to push this whole idea further along, so when we got to Jackson, because we had to pay for the- for our

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

role in the process, we got together with SCLC and we decided that we were going to have a concert and they said, “Well, who can we get for a concert?” And I went out and contacted my friend James Brown and I told him that Doctor King was involved in this march and we were in Jackson and it’s been a good march so far, it’s a march against fear. It’s in Jackson, Mississippi, we got a large crowd that’s going to be out, can- can you come? And he said, “Yeah, where we coming?” And I told him and I said, “And I’m a, I’m a give somebody else your number so that they can work out the logistics,” and I said, “You know, we don’t have any money?” He said, “That’s okay,” said, “I’ll take care of that.”

01:26:29:00 And so, I said, “Well, is there- is there anything else we need to know?” He said, “No, I’ll be there.” And, and I went and told people that that’s who was going to come, that information got around and you had a standing room only crowd out there the night before the last march outside of the town limits of Jackson into Jackson itself. And he had a- he had a- he had a good show, but again, you know, the, the fact that we were able to, to get this kind of activity played right into because we were going to have a direct impact on popular culture. With James Brown being there and seeing these people and marching against fear, he knew what Mississippi was, that eventually he was going to do “I’m black and I’m proud” and that’s what he got out of where we were in the march as we began to shift from just voter registration and organizing independent political parties to an, an empowerment, to trying to figure out where we go as the next step. We had already made the- taken the position against the war in Vietnam.

01:27:53:00 And so we had all these things coming together at the same time, and we thought that we had turned the corner and were beginning to move a little bit out of the civil rights arena to a human rights kind of arena and that was the transition that we saw that we were moving in that general direction. But I say that because the speeches were pretty standard by everybody the next day that I didn’t perceive any hostility between anybody. And by this time the NAACP had decided that they were going to try to get back on the march and they had Aaron Henry to speak on behalf of the NAACP and we allowed him to speak and there was also Charles Evers who was

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

trying to get in on the speech and so we, you know, we- we just allowed it to go. We had been successful in doing what he wanted to do and that was educate, educate, educate. And so that was-

01:28:58:00 TREY ELLIS:

There wasn't a sense of- King never talked after the Black Power speech about hey, you know, there's some footage of a little bit of how he was a little- and he writes in his book about how he had to navigate the term Black Power and it wouldn't have been- it wouldn't have been the term that he had would've chosen at that moment.

01:29:16:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

Right, right, that's, that's right. Now, what happens then, and I shared this story with Garrow back when he was doing his first book on Doctor King, was Doctor King asked me and Stokely and Willie Ricks to come over and have dinner at his house and that he just wanted to talk. And so, we went over to his house and I think it's a basement room in his house and we sat in that basement room. He wanted to understand where Black Power came from and why it is that we selected that and why did we do it then and everything that we could tell him about how- because it was SNCC who did the Black Power piece. And so, we did that. And then what we wanted to know was when was he going to make a statement against the war in Vietnam? And so, I tell people that, you know, we talked about what our statement was. We were going to refuse induction because we didn't believe that the war in Vietnam justified the loss of lives on both sides and that we didn't think that there was an objective that was needed- I mean, that was in place that talked about why it is that you're getting poor, mostly a lot of black people to go and fight in Vietnam when in fact they were in areas where they couldn't even participate in the democratic process. So- and I'm, talking about the small 'd' process and so there were a lot of contradictions. And so, he understood that.

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

01:31:19:00 And so, what we ended up doing was we ended up to agree on some principles and I think that this is important because most people don't know that this event took place. And the important principles was, was that as a minister of the gospel who-thou shalt not kill and those kinds of things, should be against the war in Vietnam and that we wanted Doctor King to think about that long and hard. Because as the moral icon of the movement, he needs to address that issue. What we need to do is we need to keep people from have- distracting from events and activities that he wanted to engage in and that we would support him. If we disagreed, you wouldn't, you wouldn't hear anything at all. When we agreed, we would support him.

01:32:23:00 And that manifested itself in nineteen sixty-eight when he is trying to put together the Poor People's Campaign. And what he does it he goes to the campgrounds in, in D.C., and what they have is they have a lot of people who are talking about it, a lot of Black Power groups saying, you know, "Don't go down there and don't be a part of this Poor People's Campaign," and all this kind of stuff, and that, you know, they were more militant and they had all this kind of stuff. No experience in organizing any community, they had maybe militias and those kinds of things and so what Doctor King did was Doctor King asked Kwame if he would talk to those people who were trying to interrupt press conferences and all that kind of stuff to-

01:33:29:00 TREY ELLIS:
Sorry, can you go back and say to who Kwame- when did he change it? You said Stokely and Kwame there.

CLEVELAND SELLERS:
Yeah, he changed his name...

TREY ELLIS:
Let me just go back after this, right?

CLEVELAND SELLERS:

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Okay.

01:33:40:00 TREY ELLIS:

So, if you could just go- just- you were just telling the story of how the- going to the march, how- how he enlists Stokely and you to help sell the march on- on the- the Poor People's march.

01:33:52:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

Okay, he- Doctor King and, and in this dinner and discussion and it- the discussion was about three hours long, asked us about Black Power. He wanted to know everything that we were thinking, where we were going with it, how we were planning to go and all this kind of stuff and we shared that with him. Stokely shared that with him, I shared that with him in terms of the programs perspective on, on SNCC. We also talked to him about the war in Vietnam and that we wanted SCLC to take a position against the war in Vietnam, especially because he comes from a group of clergy, black preachers and that we wanted them to condemn that war in Vietnam based on the fact that it was immoral, okay? At that point, we- he also agreed to not continue to talk about Black Power in a negative context, not in terms of people breaking windows and all those kinds of things, but just in terms of a tactical shift in the movement to talk about identity and, and those, those kinds of things, a shift in terms of talking about trying to elect as many elected officials that you possibly could. Did you want isolation? No. And, and that's one of the things that we talked about.

01:35:38:00 And in his, in his "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community," he actually talks about that, but he also talks about the proponents of Black Power and he said that there were some who were responsible and those ones who were responsible were those who wanted to address the movement's shift again in talking about identity and, and, and class and those kinds of things, that should, that should be allowed to happen. And he said that two of the people who expressed that very well was, was Floyd McKissick and Stokely Carmichael, that they should not be isolated

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

and alienated. But in terms of SNCC we did a couple of things that didn't help us at all. We got caught in talking about Black Power as anti-white. We, we didn't operate like that, that wasn't what we wanted. We didn't want to discard the history and the legacy and the memories of so many of those young whites who joined with us to make a difference up to that point in America.

01:36:58:00 But we also wanted them to shift gears and go over and begin to organize in the white community. So, that's what we were trying to emphasize. But we had a group inside that, that released a statement that was released to the New York Times and the New York Times said it was the SNCC official position. And anytime something comes up where you have said that you're anti-white, that distracts and that takes it away from everything else and your case that you're trying to build is moot. We fought through that. We tried to explain what we were trying to do, where we were trying to move and we tried to do that with the African American first, because it- we thought it was important that they take ownership of Black Power. Now, we're not responsible, but how everybody uses Black Power, it's just like some people, you know, got registered to vote so they could become republicans so that they could get a handout or something, you know, because they are in fact a republican voter. So, getting the right to vote don't mean that we are supporting somebody who wants to use the vote in order to get riches from that kind of thing. But I'm just using that analogy to talk about the fact that we had an agreement on those kinds of principles.

01:38:32:00 And the example that I am using is the example of when Doctor King was setting up to go to the Poor People's- to go to Washington, D.C., there were a lot of groups in Washington, D.C. who were Black Power groups who were saying that, "We don't want Resurrection City, we don't want the march to come here. We want liberation," and, and as if there was some distance between what Doctor King was doing and what they were doing. And so, he solicited Stokely to, to, to, to talk with those groups and act them- ask them just to back off, and so that's what Stokely did. He went and talked to them, he said, you know, "For you who don't want to have any dealings with Doctor King, just don't say anything at all, stay away, don't go down, don't try to distract from him. Just let him do what he's going to do. You do what you

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

want to do, let him what he's going to do." And that's the way they worked out that kind of truce so that people wouldn't be attacking him and harassing him at the news conferences and those kinds of things where we was talking about setting up Resurrection- Resurrection City.

01:39:50:00 So, I think that whole process began to work, and I'm also saying that when he did his book, he, he actually tried to clarify his position because he started out by talking about what the assumption was that Black Power was, it was isolation, it was separation, and it was all those kinds of things and he said that that would not work. SNCC didn't- never said those kinds of things. It said that we want our organizers who are good organizers to go into the white community, but that you need to have the African American organizer in the African American community. You cannot send a white person into a Watts when it's- when it's blowing up like it is. I mean, that's- that's just- it doesn't work. And so, there were times tactically when we had to pull back, like in- in Mississippi. The white people who were coming on- the white students who were coming into Mississippi, they were getting beat half to death just by showing up, so we, we, we said, "Well, you know, maybe we need to back that out a little bit and when we- at a point where we are in areas where that's not going to happen, we can change that around. The same thing with Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner. They, they were killed because there was no stop on brutalizing and beating them and being upset with them 'til they were dead. And so you had to recognize you have to change your tactics as you go along. So that's- that was how that whole process ended.

01:41:39:00 TREY ELLIS:

Can we back up a little bit to the- I heard that or read that King invited you both, you and Stokely to hear his sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church, sort of a precursor setup to his Riverside speech. Is that true, can you talk about, did he-?

01:41:55:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Yeah, it was- it was-it was not the precursor to Riverside, it was the first release of that statement in, in Ebenezer and- and we had it at that point set up because there were a lot of other things that happened in between, but I'ma- I'ma do this and then I'll come back and get the in-betweens. But Doctor King called Stokely and said, "I want you to come to church," and Stokely said, "When?" He said, "It's Sunday." He said, "I have a speech I'm going to make and I want you to hear it." And Stokely said, "Doctor King, you know, I'm a heathen so I, I'm not going to be up..." He said, "Come to church." And I said- and he said, "Okay, well, I'll come, I'll put on my Sunday go to meeting suit and I'll come on over there to your church." And he- then after he hung up with Doctor King, he called me.

01:43:03:00 Stokely called me and said, "We have to go to church on Sunday, Doctor King is going to make a speech that we need to- we need to hear." And- a sermon, he said it was a sermon, a special sermon, and so we got up and we went over and we got there and we- Stokely had promised we were going to be on the first row. We couldn't make it to the first row, that was too early, but we got on the second row and Doctor King started talking about his position against the war in Vietnam. And when it was over, we both stood up and cheered, Stokely and I, and then eventually the rest of the church got up and cheered, but that was- that was just sweet to my heart because I had been a resistor, an anti-war resistor before and had actually refused induction into the military service. And during that time, I was refusing induction, I talked to Doctor King about being a conscientious objector and how to stand on faith and principles and those kinds of things and he talked to me all the time.

01:44:24:00 I remember one time he was on Auburn Avenue and I think he was down at the newspaper office on Auburn Avenue, there's a black newspaper office down there. And he was driving his Chevrolet, he parked it and got out and came around, and he said, "Cleveland, how are you doing?" And I said, "Doctor King I am doing fine." He said, "I got some good news for you." He said that Reverend Borders which was the largest black church on Auburn Avenue said that he is- "He is in that jury pool and we're going to try to get him to sit on that jury for you. And if he can sit on that jury for you, we're going to sure enough try to get you out of this thing." But he said,

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

you know, “Stick to your guns, hold on,” and just encouragement. He was- he was the person that I went to for that kind of encouragement. And by this time Doctor King is also aware that I needed to be living my life right and he told me that he had met a young lady that was a friend of mine on the Mississippi Meredith march. He said, “You all need to get married.” And so, I said, “Doctor King, when I am ready to get married, I’m going to call you first and I want you to perform the wedding.” “Alright Cleveland, I’ll do it. Just call me.” And so, in January of nineteen sixty-eight I called Doctor King and I said, “I am ready to get married,” and I said, “I’m calling you ‘cause I want you to schedule and we’ll go in the basement of Ebenezer Baptist Church and we’ll do this thing.” And he said, “Okay.” And Stokely was my best man and we went down in there, I think Willie Ricks was with us at that time, and we got married.

01:46:44:00 And shortly after that came the Orangeburg Massacre where the students were shot and killed, I’m shot and I’m also, you know, been tried and found guilty for the, the war, and so I am going through a lot of things and the country is going through a lot of things and I end up getting charged being involved in a one-man riot in Orangeburg, South Carolina where three students were killed, one high school student, Delano Middleton being eighteen years old. Most of the students who were shot, and there were about fifty students that were shot, most of them were shot in the back and the ball of the feet and all that kind of stuff. And Doctor King knew about it, so he was one of the people who sent a statement calling on the governor to have an investigation, find out and fire the police officers and all that kind of stuff. And shortly after that I was, I was bailed out of prison when I could raise my bond. It was exceptionally high, we had to go through the courts to get it reduced and all that kind of thing.

01:48:10:00 But I had a chance to just speak to Doctor King just once after that and then April fourth came along and when it came along, I... I was just shocked without belief. I was flying from Columbia to Washington, D.C. I was met in Washington by Stokely and some other friends and we- I was trying to figure out why I saw these SCLC people rushing through the airport. They were coming and I was going. I was going

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

out of the airport and they said- I said to them, “How you doing?” They said, “We’re not doing good, we’re rushing to Memphis.” I couldn’t understand it ‘cause I had been out from before he was shot to the time he was dead, Doctor King, and so I asked Stokely and those and they were so busy being angry and frustrated and it was just- it was just a- so I’m sitting there like a, you know, duck out of water, I’m trying to figure out what’s going on. So eventually he told me that Doctor King had been killed. And I just- it was- it was a terrible shock.

01:49:32:00 And my thing was, was that my relationship with Doctor King had always been a human being to a human being relationship, it was never the leader of the movement and any of those kinds of things because during my entire time in the civil rights movement, I never wanted to take on those roles as the speaker of the movement or any of those kinds of things. Sometimes I had to do that, but I preferred being a kind of under the radar kind of individual. And I was able to maintain that. And I think that that probably is one of the keys to why we were able to, to, to, to manage Stokely as well as we could, to outrun the opposition, to outrun the racists, to outrun the local police and sheriffs, to outrun the FBI, to outrun the CIA, to outrun everybody who was trying to keep SNCC from moving people, local people, community people to the next level. And I think we were able to do that as much as we could and then eventually that began to catch up for us. Plus, for some of us we started families and we had to deal with some things that were a part of our experience and making those kinds of adjustments. It was a kind of rough existence, kind of a rough experience, but we were- we, we, we wanted to do the work, so that’s the sacrifice that we had to make and we weren’t ready to talk about how that knocked us off stride and we couldn’t live our lives beyond that. We talked about how we moved in the next arena, you know, let some younger people come on and move it the next state, but maybe we had kind of, for some of us, ended what we could do because we were getting older and all those other kinds of things.

01:51:41:00 But I, I, you know, we’re still committed and have been committed through the years. Our job was to pass along to the next generation that’s going to pick up the torch, our experiences, our stories, and to let them know that Doctor King was a real

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

person. We had leaders in our organization, Ella Baker, who had the same kinds of degrees and knowledge and experiences as Doctor King, so that wasn't any difference. Plus, we had the person who worked on the- on the Poor People's march with Doctor King was Marian Wright Edelman and she did a fantastic job, she was a SNCC'er. And so, we, we kept working on those things. And then we worked on, you know, making sure that people recognized Doctor King with the national holiday and just getting people to begin to appreciate and understand and at the same time bring him down from being that shining star that people had done. They had sterilized him. He didn't have any voice, he didn't have any, any- you couldn't beat Doctor King because he was so exceptional.

01:53:05:00 And what we tell young people is that you can be a Doctor King, a Malcolm X of whatever you want to be. You could be a Ralph Bunch or you could be a- the Supreme Court justice, Thurgood Marshall, or you can be an astronaut, Mae Jemison or you could be Dorothy Height, you know, with the National Council of Negro Women. There were any number of things that we could do, all we had to do was believe in ourselves and go forward. So that's what the experiences were like in, in the relationship with Doctor King. I, I, I felt it to my heart, it felt like a part of my arm was cut off, a part of me was cut off. It, it, it hit me very deeply, his assassination. And then with my dear friend and brother Doctor- I mean, Kwame Nkrumah- I mean, Kwame Carmichael, it was the same kind of feeling. And it was for all of the veterans that I worked with and lived with and all those other kinds of things that we, we want to, you know, hold them in high esteem and say that, you know, we did what we had to do, we did what we could do. Did we get all the way? No, but did we complete some tasks? Yeah.

01:54:41:00 We moved the movement from nineteen sixty to, to even now, all the way along, the principles and the guidepost in SNCC are still driving people even today and those principles include the life and the history and the legacy of Doctor Martin Luther King, 'cause he made some ultimate sacrifices along the way in doing that. And to clear up that myth about this antagonism between Stokely and- and Doctor King. They, they, they communicated with each other, they were respect- respectful about

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

each other, they didn't mince words with each other, they talked straight, and I think there was an appreciation for each other, certainly on the part of Stokely there was appreciation for Doctor King and his work, that he was a good man and he was a simple person. And that that's, that's really important. And I think there was an effort made to characterize that with the horse and the mule and the wagon carrying his coffin, that's what he would've wanted. He wanted to be- wanted to be able to touch the earth and, and the, the cloth of the earth, the people, and make a difference in their lives and enrich his own life and so- and I think he was able to do that kind of thing. Next question.

01:56:18:00 TREY ELLIS:
Can we go back to the Canton riots and the tear gas. Can you sort of paint that picture, Andy Young talks about how petrified he was? Can you talk about the chaos of that night a little bit?

01:56:29:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:
Okay. When the march gets to Canton, they go through the same ritual, that is set up a tent and go and set up a stage. They used to have a tractor-trailer- a tractor truck trailer pull out and they would put microphones on, on that and sound systems and then people would get up on the trailers and they would go ahead and speak. When they got to Canton, the police said that they couldn't- they couldn't set up and they couldn't have the rally and the police were in masks- gas masks and they had their guns drawn, so people continued to move as if they were going to have the rally and the police kind of pushed them in and started lobbing these bombs- teargas bombs all throughout the folk out there and then people went and got into the tent so they could be out and away from it and they threw the gas masks in there and they would just- as they came out it was dark, but there is some film footage to show that the police actually took the butts of the rifles and hit the people- and upside the head and all that kind of stuff, and took the batons and beat people, It was a police riot in the

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

truest sense, and it was teargas all over the place so nobody could breathe except the police.

01:58:04:00 And so, you know, Doctor- I'm sorry, Andy Young was out there and he just, he just told everybody to get the people who are sick and let's, let's get them to an area where we can look after them and take care of them and we were going to just cancel doing what we were doing. No use to try to hold positions and all that kind of stuff, let's just get people out of here, get this whole thing kind of settled down and move on the next day. But that's what it was like. It was like many scenes that we have seen in which teargas and hysteria and actual raw violence is perpetuated against those, those individuals who are in there like Birmingham without the dogs, that's what it was a lot like.

01:58:55:00 TREY ELLIS:
And can we talk a little bit more about the debates? I'm interested in this walking- we have those great scenes of King with the straw hat and the three of you, like, up front like walking and talking. Was there any effort of him trying to get you to modify your position of Black Power and nonviolence? Was there- you know-

01:59:16:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:
Not until after Greenwood- Greenwood and the- well, let me do it another way. There was no challenge to the discussions that we were having with Doctor King along that route until after the Greenwood event in which Black Power was actually chanted and that- I think that went out on the news where black people were jumping up and down, poor black people saying, "Black power! That's what we want! What do we want!? We want Black Power!" And, and because of the agitation and because of the Black Power, people associated that with anti-white violence and then, you know, it began to filter back in because at that point, Doctor King had a fairly small staff of people out there with him doing the march and then the other folk began to come in to Mississippi to kind of reinforce so they could kind of tamper down the Black Power thing. And some, some, some of the people in the march were

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

intimidated by the whole effort of Black Power and, you know, they kind of became, you know, kind of concerned about themselves or whatever because, you know, they were intimidated by it. As long as we were talking about nonviolence and, and all that kind of thing, everybody felt comfortable, that, you know, it wasn't going to be anything going on, but you do whatever you want to do and I do whatever I want to do.

02:01:01:00 So, it was through that effort that we began to hear Doctor King kind of shying away, backing off of- not understanding all of what had happened because we weren't really listening to the outside world or looking at the news and all. So, we weren't aware, but we began to see that, that kind of shifting away with communications that we saw in Selma, so we knew something was going on, but now, is not the time to sit down and get an explanation for all of that. That's why we felt very good when Doctor King offered us an opportunity to come over. And he, he kind of agreed, he said, "I thought that's what you were doing and saying," but you know that he was the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and if he didn't get these speeches and if people started not inviting him, you know, he had the responsibility for the entire organization and everybody on there, families and, and those kinds of people and he couldn't, he couldn't at that point join in, in support- outright support of Black Power. So, we understood that and he made it very clear that that's what was an issue. But we said, okay, but on the war in Vietnam, that's going to happen too, but it's not probably going to happen as much as it would over, over the Black Power piece.

02:02:40:00 TREY ELLIS:
Did you feel that you had to coax, like, you putting the pressure on- by saying Black Power and Vietnam, did you feel you had- you were- you were consciously putting pressure on King to push him further to the left?

02:02:52:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

We had a responsibility to move Doctor King as far to the left as you possibly could. And so when we had a opportunity to talk to him about the war in Vietnam and about Black Power, we encouraged him to understand what we were saying and to support those efforts, and so we did stress that he needed to take a position against the war, the war in Vietnam. That was, that was mission number one at the start of it, you know, to get Doctor King to kind of keep moving further and further to the left, and to recognize we had seen that people in Alabama who couldn't vote, and people in Alabama that was getting killed and Mississippi for trying to register to vote and all those were getting killed and all that because they didn't want- they didn't want them to vote, they didn't want them to have power, they didn't want them to make independent decisions, and that we needed to keep educating people on those factors, to people who would listen and understand and move on that and take those kinds of actions. We wanted to, to, to have the community with the resources, the skills, and the power to make decisions about their lives as, as much as they could and continue to develop strategies way be- you know, way after we had been in there organizing the first time around and had left. That was our- that was our goal and that was our mission, to train people who could have those skills, those organizing skills and talents to get people going.

02:04:34:00 And I think you see that manifested even with the election of Obama, that you had the largest turnout of African Americans with the Obama campaign that you've ever had in America, period. And a lot of that was because the community organizers went in and said, now we have a chance, go to the polls and vote. And for those people who, who we kind of write off sometimes for going to the polls, we said you have a responsibility now, and people felt that responsibility and they came out and did that kind of thing. And so that was the first time that we have actually seen Black Power manifest itself in a very positive way in America history, that everybody who said, "Well, I'm not sure what Black Power is, I'm not sure what it isn't," get a frontal view of what it was that we were talking about at that point, but we were talking about it not just in the political arena, we were talking about it in every arena, in the area of healthcare, in the area of, of, of, of education, in all those areas that we

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

address those problems that keep, you know, the African American community from being able to grow and mature and live a healthy life and be a part of the American democratic process.

02:06:05:00 TREY ELLIS:

I wanted to go back to the- when you first talked to Doctor King and you tell him that you're not going to show up, you're not going to appear to the draft board and how he warns you and then later how the, the preacher, he says, oh, I've met this pre- the preacher's going to be- he might be on the draft board, you'll be okay, and then it turns out you're not okay and you're actually, you know, you- there were repercussions. Would you take us through a little bit of that?

02:06:30:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

Okay. Well, when, when we were talking about the- when, when we were talking with Doctor King about SNCC's position against the war in Vietnam, we had a copy of the statement, we let him read it, we said that we understand this is unique to SNCC, but you still need to from the clergy position do a statement against the war in Vietnam. And at that time, or just before that- I mean, just after that time we were speaking to him, I was- I had said to him that, you know, "I will probably be one of those people who will be drafted and will have to refuse induction into the armed service." And at that point he said, "Okay, you know, call on me and we'll see what we can do to help." I, I've had several short conversations with him that, you know, we're, we're, we're on the road to, to, to my stepping out on Black Power.

02:07:43:00

But, you know, when I went down and, and refused induction into the armed services, I went downstairs and I had a picture made 'cause I had Stokely and a couple other SNCC'ers with me so I could make my statement against the war in Vietnam and why it is that I stepped aside. It's a long statement, but it talks about the struggles in Africa and Patrice Lumumba and it talked about the struggles all across America and throughout American history that black people stood up for the rights of justice and peace and equality. And we were going to continue to do that kind of

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

thing and we thought that the war was politically, you know, out of the realms of something that you should say as a progressive country, that you're fighting in Vietnam for democracy, and you don't have democracy in Mississippi and Alabama and South Carolina and, and all the places across the south and you have people who are shutting down all efforts to have democracy for all citizens of the United States of America.

02:08:56:00 TREY ELLIS:

And then you said you ran into King on, on Auburn Avenue and the preacher might be on the-

02:09:05:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

Yeah, I ran into Doctor King on Auburn Avenue, he was driving his big Chevrolet and his was parallel parking and he parked it and got out and came around and said, "Cleveland, how you doing?" And I said, "I'm doing fine. I'm, you know, still out here on the streets trying to organize the people." And he said, "Got some good news!" Said that, "Reverend Borders who has the largest church on Auburn Avenue." And, and he said that, "He is going to be in the pool and we're hoping he makes it up to the jury and if he's on the jury, he's going to help you out there." And I said, "Oh, thank you. I appreciate that." But he didn't make it to the jury pool, he, he got lopped off early, but it was- it was a degree of hope, but we talked about, again, you know, that kind of conscientious objector position that I thought was important for me to make- take. And, and, and going to court I was going to be steadfast, I wasn't going to be apologetic, I wasn't sorry for what I did. I understood there were consequences and I also understood that I had to address those consequences when that time came.

02:10:33:00 So I was- I was alright, but the fact that I might be doing five years, but- and he was inspirational in saying to me that, "That might be it, but you have to- you have to have- you have to be principled about this and you have to understand that it'll be a tough haul, but you have to kind of stick in there, you have to be sure of what it is that you're doing and it, it, it'll be alright. There will be justice at some point on the

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

other side.” So that was, that was our conversation there. I think he was going into the Atlanta world, I think is the name of the newspaper, which is a black newspaper on Auburn Avenue. So, we would, we would have those kinds of discussions periodically when I would run into him in Atlanta, but he was mostly on Auburn Avenue and I was on Hunter Street, which is now Martin Luther King Boulevard. SNCC was on Hunter Street, Martin Luther King Boulevard and SCLC was on Auburn Avenue. Both of these are black business districts in Atlanta and still are, but those are the areas that we would find- if I wanted to find somebody from SCLC, I’d go by the office and then I’d go up and down Auburn Avenue and I’d probably find them in those areas and that’s what they would do if they were trying to find a SNCC person.

02:11:59:00 TREY ELLIS:
Could you talk briefly a little bit about the internal SNCC debates between whites not- white SNCC’ers not being allowed to- like for the March on Fear, making it on- March Against Fear, or just sort of kicking whites out versus protecting white students from marching in- I mean, doing activist work in-

02:12:21:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:
There was no other marches after the Mississippi Meredith March and the Mississippi Meredith March is where Black Power comes up and then we see the shifting dynamics in SNCC. And what it was, was that we began to, to watch as a Black Power conference was held with leaders from the urban areas, New Jersey, Philadelphia, New York. It was held in New York and- no, it was held in Newark- Amiri Baraka, and so what we would do is we would simply say that all these things in fact are going on that we had to- we had to address in our organization. Well, there was a group in the organization who I called renegades who actually developed a position paper on Black Power and that position paper happened to have gotten into the New York Times and when that position paper got into the New York Times, it was saying that it was a kind of a anti-white newspaper, but that wasn’t ever the

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

official position of SNCC. Even when it came into SNCC it was never voted on as being the official position on SNCC in regards to Black Power, but anytime that notion of you being anti-white or, you know, that creates a backlash and you're not going to be able to get your message through.

02:14:21:00 So, it was unfortunate that that, that information got out there and at that point the debate started in SNCC about the, the removal of, of whites from the organization. And my thing was was that what we wanted to do was make sure that whites understood, and we had already talked to the Southern Regional Council and Anne Braden and a number of white southerners who had been engaged in civil rights for a long period of time, and told her what we were trying to do. We were trying to make that transition and we needed help with that and had that all in place, but when the anti-white piece come out, people start looking at us and, and, and turning their nose up because there were a lot of sacrifices made by young white students and by white adults who pushed through on segregation and had to stand out and got the same kind of treatment that many of us received as a result of being opposed to segregation.

02:15:36:00 So, we said that whites, because they had done organizing in the African American community and had some talents and skills, should go out and organize in the white community. And then what we would have is we would be in a situation where we could talk about whites and blacks coming together in some kind of alliance over a better America. We're talking about what kinds of systems we need to see and how we get rid of racism and those kinds of things, but until that group is actually organized, we're just organizing in the African American community and that's the reality and that's what we were doing. So, we didn't need to train anymore white organizers to organize in the African American community, we needed some of the white organizers to go and organize in the white community and the result of that is is that never took place and so you're beginning to feel some of the backlash from that now when you have poor whites saying that they haven't been treated fairly and they don't have jobs and all those kinds of things.

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

02:16:44:00 Well, a lot of that has to do with the- we never organized. It was a group that could've been, should've been and would've been had we not had, had some conflict and confusion about what was the next step. So, the debate centered around people having loyalties in their organization and all those kinds of things. And at that point, they said that, "Okay, well, we'll have whites organizing in white communities and that's where it was left and that's as much as we could hold onto at that particular point. And after that I was gone and I think they might've another position, which by this time, the organization is not in, in its best position, best shape. Many of the long-term organizers have gone, I have gone, many of the people who had served in official capacities in the organization, many of the organizers had gone. The organizers out of- out of Arkansas had all but gone, and then Albany they had locked in or were staying forever, so- stay in the long term, not forever, but the long term-

TREY ELLIS:

To disintegrate that- I want to-

CLEVELAND SELLERS:

And so it, it, it disintegrated with a lot of help from the FBI and disinformation and all that kind of stuff.

02:18:15:00 TREY ELLIS:

That's exactly- I wanted to talk about the FBI. Did you ever notice the FBI? Did you have suspicions about, about infiltration and then we'll pivot to King and the FBI, but you can talk about SNCC's relationship with the FBI and then- and then-

02:18:29:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

We knew about the FBI, but we had enough sense to know about it early on, we knew about COINTELPRO probably around nineteen sixty-four when we found out about how they were operating. And the fact is that the FBI probably should have been aware of the fact that Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney went back to Meridian

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

and was gone after Philadelphia and that the law enforcement might have some implications in that, that never came up. When I was in Orangeburg in nineteen sixty-eight at the Orangeburg Massacre, the FBI was staying in the same room as Pete Strong who was head of the SLED, South Carolina Law Enforcement Division, and when the attorney general asked the FBI about a report, nobody- I mean, nobody told him that the FBI was on the scene and it took them two weeks to decide that they wanted to at least let them know they were on the scene, but they had a very fragile report, they didn't have anything. They had two pages, three pages, that's all that's ever been done on Orangeburg when the FBI- head of the FBI in South Carolina was on the scene with the head of the law enforcement when the kids were killed and you got a three-page report. No, no.

02:20:03:00 And what they had done prior to that is character assassination. They had described me as this Black Power militant. And what I was trying to do was I was trying to do a, a, a Watts riot. That's what I was trying to perpetuate in Orangeburg and they missed the fact that the students at South Carolina State had been active ever since nineteen fifty-seven, that was probably the most activist campus of any of the HBCU's in the country. And you cannot let that go when you're trying to figure out where do you go and how do you get in and do those kinds of things, but the FBI have- have not- they have not been my friend and it started out that way when I left Howard University. And so, you know, I was under martial law for, for- not martial law, I was under the, the control of the marshal's office. I had to report every time I went. When I went to school in, in, in Boston, I went to Harvard. I had to check in at the marshal's office in order for me to- every month, and then if I were to leave I had to get permission to leave, to go home or anywhere else. So the FBI just, like you see a lot of communities saying that the police haven't been your friends, and that, that was the case for many African Americans growing up in the South, but it was also on the national level with the FBI.

02:21:37:00 TREY ELLIS:

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

So, you have a feeling at all you know, especially after Riverside Church, Hoover was especially, you know, hell-bent on going after King. Did you have any sense of that at the time?

02:21:50:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

Absolutely, but we all felt that and we all could see FBI agents around and about. And they were very deliberate in, you know, watching you and watching you travel and all of that kind of stuff. In places like Mississippi, they had the Sovereignty Commission and they would instruct police in Mississippi, state police and local police to surveil. So, they got all of this documentation on people and what they, what they perceived that they were doing, not what they were doing, but what they perceived that they were in fact doing. So, the surveillance was, was tremendous and just as Muhammad Ali's case was resolved over wiretap, mine was too at the same time, around the same time. So, you know, I was, I was- the charges were dropped against me, but I had already done three months in federal penitentiary as a result of Orangeburg, which the judge said that I could not- I could not post the bond because of my moral turpitude and he was talking about the Orangeburg massacre. And you know, it- it's just- the FBI and local police have not been a friend of mine and I don't think they are even today.

02:23:20:00 But J. Edgar Hoover- it was known that if we were under surveillance that Doctor King was under surveillance. We, we, we knew that there were people in the organization- infiltrators in the organization and we tried to minimize that in SNCC. So, the criteria for coming into SNCC at first was that you had to have a badge of honor. You had to have some arrests and you had to be on that bus in order for you to become a member in SNCC or you have to be active and in an organization that was a progressive organization that you're coming from. So, we managed to for a long period of time, you know, not have informants in the organization. Plus, we were young and we talked in a different language and all that kind of stuff so it made it difficult for somebody who was coming outside inside and you not being able to see that they were like a duck out of water.

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

TREY ELLIS:
What did the FBI look like?

02:24:25:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:
All white. Now, the informants were black, but all the FBI were white, no blacks, all white. And so that would be the first telltale sign 'cause we lived in communities in which we were trying to change. And so, you know, there wouldn't be many unmarked cars that were brand new- that would be anybody other than the FBI. And they would- I was saying they were new because we, we would recognize the local police. They wouldn't have new cars to ride around in, they would have the old stock. So that's, that's what, that's what we, we looked at when we went out or when we're walking or if we went around the block or that kind of thing. Plus, our phones- we found out that we could actually not pay our telephone bills and the phones would stay on. The only reason that was because if, if they did, if they let the phone go off they couldn't tap us any longer and so they would tap us like that.

02:25:41:00 And I was saying I- at one point I was- I actually was staying in the apartment with Stokely, and I use that name interchangeably 'cause of different periods of time, that's all. He is Kwame Ture and that's how we- that's how I call him now. He's crossed over. But his phone was usually tapped and so by staying there that meant that when I was on the phone I was being tapped. And when I was in Atlanta, he used to come through Atlanta periodically, but he would stay at our place. By that time it was more than just me staying at an apartment, so he would come by and stay with us and that kind of thing. And he would call me when he was away even after we had moved on from SNCC he would call on a regular basis, so that meant my phone was still connected. So it might've been Stokely whose phone call gave the FBI a pause and what they did not want to reveal as a result of the overturn in refusal of the induction charges against me so.

02:27:19:00 TREY ELLIS:

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

I was thinking about now when people talk about the legacy of Doctor King, even, even while he was alive or in the fight to get to his holiday, there all have been these issues in you know, of his affairs and the wiretapping of his hotel rooms and using these affairs to delegitimize his work.

02:27:40:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

Well, they have used everything they could possibly use. I think that when we- when we try to focus in on what they say in terms of the affairs and all that kind of thing, that's the way to distract us and that's what the purpose of it is. He had these affairs, so did John F Kennedy. You know? I'm not saying which way, I don't know, it doesn't matter to me. I know what he did, I know what he gave, I knew what his sacrifices were, I knew what his principles were and that's all that mattered to me about Doctor King. I'm glad to be able to say that he was a man just like all men who, you know, stood up and stood up on principle and sought change and worked to bring about change and made some of the ultimate sacrifices along the way.

02:28:35:00 You know, he- when he got his Nobel Peace Prize, an award came with it, it was something like- I think it was fifty-thousand dollars or something like that, big money in that day when he got it and he gave some to SCLC and some to other civil rights organizations, but he didn't, he didn't keep any money for himself. And I thought that that was, that was testimonial to an old belief in the African American community that you don't try to benefit in terms of enriching yourself, what you try to do is you try to enrich the community in whatever way you can and he stuck to that principle. And I always thought the same way with SNCC'ers. I mean, we had to give up that old, you know, if you brush your hair, brush it a certain way, you're going to make it, you're going to be appealing, you know, all those things, all those traditions that we have had to learn in order for us to navigate through the dual worlds that we live in. And so, you know, DuBois spoke well about that duality that we live in, one is African, the other one is America.

02:29:49:00 So, I was just very happy that he, he upheld those principles and you see it in his work, and I think his work speaks for him. So that's- that's what I think of Doctor

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

King. But that was not unusual for SNCC to have that kind of attack on them. You know, Julian Bond, when he was first running, they had all kinds of things about him running and then they wouldn't seat him because he supported the SNCC statement on Vietnam, anti-Vietnam statement, SNCC anti-Vietnam statement. But that was not unusual, that was a part of the- out of the things that- objectives that they wanted to reach, disinformation was one of those things, character Assassination was the second one, and so it's not- it's not unlikely that, you know, a whole bunch of that stuff was rubbish. And, you know, what difference does it make, you know, one way or another? Why not just go on and go to something that has some meaning and substance to it?

02:31:02:00 I, I just- you know, when, when he came out against the war in Vietnam I said, "Oh, my goodness he's right where we are, you know, he's coming." And then that means you got to speed up because you got some more territory to cover. You know, and he began to take advantage of that, but, you know, shortly after that he's assassinated, shortly after that. We did it, he did it a year after we did it, a year and a couple of months, and then a year and a couple of months after the Vietnam statement he's assassinated. So, you know, that's- that's just the way it happened and this is what we have. And we were always about trying to use and being resourceful ourselves and use what we had to work with 'cause- but the FBI, again, was not my friend and most of SNCC wasn't their friend. And J Edgar Hoover made it very clear that we can come down and protest in front of the justice department, or any- FBI or anywhere else, but that he was not going to protect civil rights workers with FBI agents. He said the crime had to be committed in order for him to send somebody out. And so, he was saying essentially that you're on your own.

02:32:27:00 But when we were in Mississippi and started out in Mississippi, we didn't have anybody else in Mississippi to turn to, but the FBI and we had hope that they would do the right kind of thing, but, you know, we found out the hard way that they were turning that information in, you know, we got a report that says that, you know, there's a witness. I'm going to talk to the prosecutor in the- well, you have, you have sentenced them to death if that's the case. And that's the way it was. No person in

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Mississippi- no- let me be absolutely correct how they stated, “No white Anglo-Saxon protestant in Mississippi will be charged with murder of a black person ever. Ever.”

02:33:20:00 And up until the feds went back to old cases, that principle was in place. I don’t care how you’re killed. And the thing was, was that we found- I think it was Reverend Shuttlesworth that said, “Nobody knows but God above how many black men were in the rivers in Mississippi,” but it was a whole host of them. It was a whole host of them. And you know, they were- there were- there was a scheme that you could do where you’d open your door up while you’re riding along and the person rides by and the person hits the door and slams the door back and roll on down the hill and be a statistic. You know, shooting out the car, or dragging people behind the car and all that kind of stuff, we’ve had some of those things in the twenty-first century. So, so, you know, that’s what was going on and the FBI paid no attention to it. Just like the FBI sat on their butts and didn’t, didn’t, didn’t even write a report on Orangeburg and then President Clinton got a bill passed where they were going to look at old cases, sent to the justice department, FBI came to South Carolina and said, I knew they weren’t going to open up the case because they were intricately involved in the cover up and said that they couldn’t find any justification for opening up that case.

02:34:52:00 TREY ELLIS:
When you get to the aftermath and the funeral, you write in your book about, you know, Stokely- it was surprising that he talking to people, sort of going out, actually calming- not telling people to riot as you might- as people think he would. Can you take us through like what happens after, after the assassination, that sort of week after and the rioting, what’s his role there and your role?

02:35:18:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:
Okay, well when I get to, to Washington DC, Washington, D.C. is already in a blaze and I’m catching this as I’m coming over the bridge- What’s that? Fourteenth Street- And they’re talking to me about what’s going on and that kind of thing. And so, you

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

know, the sirens are going off and it's just a mess. And so, Stokely had an apartment in a certain section of, of, of Washington, I think it was southeast Washington, D.C. And when we were finished kind of riding around trying to assess and see what was going on, he said, "It's time for me to go to my apartment and I'm going to go to sleep." And we went to his apartment and he said, "I'm going to stay here tonight." I was staying somewhere else. So, I said, "Well, I'm not going to stay here tonight and I don't think it's safe for you to stay here tonight 'cause, you know, the police know where you are, they're going to automatically put you in the middle of this, this burning and all this that's going on, so you're not going to be able to stay here tonight."

02:36:46:00 And so, we, we had a discussion about that and Stokely became adamant, and he said that, "I am going to stay here tonight." And I said, "No, you're not." And so, I said, "Well, we- we're not going anywhere fast with this. Let me do it this way. Now, if I have to knock you out and we all drag your butt out of here, you're not staying here tonight and especially not alone." And he said... I said, "Okay, now." I said, "That's my last word." And he says, [Imitating Stokely thinking of what to say] "Why y'all want to-?" I said, "Just go out and get in the car and we're going." And then I had him call the Guinea Embassy, I think it was, and they had a house for one of their ambassadors that nobody was in, but it was fully functional, so we went and stayed in the Guinea Embassy. I said, "We need to be somewhere where we can have some sure facts about where we were and how long we were there and how we set up to get into that house." And that's what we did. Next couple of days we just went around the community to see how the community was doing and talking to people. We went by Ben's Chili Bowl and on U Street, about Fourteenth and U, and went over on Georgia Avenue and places like that. But we just tried to assess what was going on and try to tamper it down because there were children involved and a whole bunch of other people and we said, 'We understand your anger, but this, this, you know, this, you know, we need to see if we can work on trying to figure out what we need to do about the assassination of Doctor King. I understand your frustration and all that kind of stuff, we're not going- we're not going to tell you what you need to

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

do because we don't even know what that is at this point, but this isn't going to help you a lot."

02:39:01:00 And at that point, you know, we just tried to get together with other leaders in the city and we also tried to find out how much, how much, how much we needed to do to get involved in trying to tamper the community down and get people together. Because it was just overwhelming because we begin to look at TV and we found out that other cities were going up and that whole thing. And I looked at James Brown and his effort up in Boston where there was a concert going on and he tried to tamper it down too. But I think that people that we touched and came in contact with understood that, you know, America had and still has a lot of things that need to be changed, but we don't need to consume ourselves in them in that, in that manner. We don't need to, to- we don't need to kind of destroy ourselves in that process. We have to have that sense of hope, which we got from the people in Mississippi. They didn't have anything, dirt floors, and they would invite you in their homes, you could stay there, they had commissary foods, you know, canned chickens and all that kind of stuff to eat, powdered eggs and grits and all that, and they would give you all that they had because they figured that was their contribution to this movement for change. And it gave you a little humility, but it also gave you to see that even though they didn't have a thing, they still had hope and faith that tomorrow and the future would be different and be brighter for them and their children and everybody else. So that's what we learned how to get through the anger and bitterness and actually get the filter in place so that we could also do that same kind of thing.

02:41:20:00 TREY ELLIS:
Do you still have hope and faith after this last election and where the country is today?

02:41:26:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:
I have hope and faith, but my thing is, is I think that there is a need for retrenchment in the African American community, that it needs to go back in and it needs to work

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

on some principles and guidelines by which we go forward. We need to go back to identity again and figure out who we are and what roles we're going to play and we have to figure out how it is that we move forward. Now, if there are some groups out there that want to coalesce with us when we get ourselves all straightened out again, we, we, we are not- we are not- we are not whole and we are not healthy and that I think we need to do that kind of thing. I think that's what the Million Man March was about, to get black men- we need to go back and revisit all of that because this thing has kind of shed some light on things that we, we don't, we don't need to go back down that road and find out whether or not America is a burning house and it set itself on fire and it doesn't want anybody to help it figure its way out of this.

02:42:41:00 You look at the vote, you see that the vote was probably the largest number of African American women ever voted against this kind of chaos and confusion, knowing it was coming. I mean, it's not like we didn't see it coming, we knew it was coming, and we went for it anyhow. So, we have to, we have to have that kind of hope and we have to have a period now where we, where we take a look back and find out what we need to do to educate our young people, to get better healthcare for our young people, and to do whatever we need to do in that regard. And, and the struggle continues, but the struggle have highs and lows. And sometimes you have to just take some time to go back and internalize and do things that you need to do on yourself. Police brutality is still at a rampant rate and, you know, people don't want you to say "black lives matter." I don't understand all of that. That's- the point is not that white lives don't matter.

02:43:54:00 See, it always gets tricked up. Racism is so pervasive in America that we get lost in that kind of thing. "Black lives matter" simply means what we said in Mississippi, our lives matter. And one of the things that brought that to a head was when the students came down for the Mississippi Summer Project, we said that, you know, if we get out there and get killed, if Chaney had gotten killed by himself, we would never have heard of James Chaney, but the fact is that you had two white students with him made it a national kind of event. And that's what, that's what I think people are saying. Not that, not that white lives or Hispanic lives, it means that black lives

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

matter and we have to do something about that. Obviously, the police and the authorities to be aren't going to do anything about that and certainly a Jeff Sessions ain't going to do anything about that. He's going to make America Alabama in the old traditional way, that's just the reality of it.

02:45:01:00 So, you know, I think, I think that we have another generation of young people who are on the cutting edge and a breakthrough and you see new organizations springing up in the African American community tired of waiting on things to happen. I live in a, in a rural county in South Carolina where Obamacare was turned down and the extension of the Medicaid was turned down. Two hospitals in the county, one in the county that I'm in and one in the adjacent county have closed, been closed for two years. One in another side of the county, and another county will- is on the verge of closing down. Healthcare- if I were to have a heart attack, I would have to wait on a helicopter to come from Columbia or Charleston to pick me up and take me up there. The trip down is thirty minutes, the trip back up is thirty minutes, so your chances of surviving a catastrophe, a traumatic injury is slim to none and people have to live like that and it's because these areas are poor and there's a certain strata that are successful in the state, they don't care about anybody else.

02:46:18:00 And even the poor whites have the same issue, but because of race they can't see it, it's just black folk that's clamoring for healthcare and education, quality education and all of that kind of thing. And so that's- racism is still well and alive and if we don't address that issue, we're going to keep going down this street. We just delay it for a minute and we bring it back. What I was saying earlier about the southern manifesto is they talked about ways in- legally, ways in which they could be in opposition and get strategies together. Nullification is one of those strategies, delegitimizing the nineteen sixty- nineteen fifty-four Supreme Court decision and doing whatever you could in the legislature to keep funds from coming to public schools, or integrated schools, and, and we've just kept working on that, and working on that and working on that. Nobody ever said let's stop doing that and let's try to provide the best education, so we go from number one to number seventeen in the world in terms of education, quality of education, secondary education in America.

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

02:47:50:00 TREY ELLIS:

Speaking of all of that, and the last question I would ask you is, you probably thought of this. Well, two- it's a two-part question. What, what is the most- what is the biggest misconception about Martin Luther King when you're talking to people about. As somebody who knew him, what's the biggest misconception? And knowing him as he was, how- were he not- had he not been assassinated, what part of the fight would he be involved in now?

02:48:17:00 CLEVELAND SELLERS:

I think- let me- let me start with the misconceptions. Misconceptions were that he was this person who sat at the center of the movement. And he did sit at the center in terms of organizations if you spread them out from left to right starting with the Urban League at one end and CORE on the other end, and, and so it works back. But he- and SCLC would've been sitting right in the center of all of that. People have this conception that he ran everything, he was the person who was coordinating all these different things, and what I've said here is that Doctor King was, you know- we were constantly trying to get him to become more and more progressive as we were growing and developing and finding out new ways to do stuff and at any point we could've stopped and that would've been okay, but it wouldn't have been okay for humanity and African Americans. So, we continued to try and find ways in which we would actually address those obstacles, those, those blockages and that kind of possibility of genocide and all that other stuff that was out there talking around and going on. So, so we, we had to continue to try to make that difference by continuing to move as fast as we could and make as much progress as we could make. And so we were outrunning the FBI and the CIA and all those groups trying to do that kind of thing 'cause they were trying to castrate us and that's- in a real term.

02:50:11:00

And so, what, what you have is, is that we have to find ways in which we can actually pass along the fact that Doctor King was not at the center making these kinds of decisions. He ended up being at the center because of the progressiveness of

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

these groups. So, you start with the Urban League being the most conservative, come on through the NAACP, SCLC, CORE and then SNCC, that's how, that's how that whole process worked. And so, he had to try to bring those more conservative groups into the loop if you're talking about having some kind of civil rights committee. But there were times when those groups in the conservative camp actually tried to destroy SNCC and that's a part of the reality. But Doctor King was at the central point and said, "But let's go head on," you know, "we can't be worrying about the slightness on the part of other people. If they will join us on this, let them join, if they don't want to join us on this, leave them alone, but keep moving." And, and, and that's one of the things that we need to point out.

02:51:31:00 And that the guy was a human being. He loved children, he played, you know, he laughed and talked, he was, he was very compassionate, he was a good preacher, he was very articulate. I have probably twenty-five of his, his, his sermons and I listen to them and I try to see how he connects it, but he connects it, he tells a story. He's an unusual talent, he's an icon of the civil rights movement, but does he, does he have more power and clout than George Washington Carver? I don't think so. And that, that's what we have to do, we have to make sure that we don't get into a situation where we're looking for a savior to free African Americans. And that's the way the historians sometimes want to write the story. It was all about Doctor King, if he hadn't done this, this wouldn't have happened, if he hadn't done that, that wouldn't have happened. But the reality is, is that Ella Baker was around in the nineteen-forties putting together the NAACP chapters across the South which SNCC used in order to get into these areas that were so recalcitrant because of the violence that- and resistance- because of the- and violent because of their history of trying to maintain the control from the period of slavery and all the rest of that.

02:53:08:00 So that- those are the kinds of things. I like to- I like to talk to him like maybe I'm talking about him now. I like to talk to young people about him like that because I want to be able to say to you, "If you can, if you can get an education, if you can, can have a social consciousness at an early age, then you will be in shape to do whatever it is you want to do. You can, you can be as articulate and as skilled with the English

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

language and skilled with the talent that it takes to make change, but you're going to have to be an organizer at some point. This, this racism is still front and center and you're going to have to figure out how to make it go away, I mean, completely. You can't just cut out segregation and say, okay, we don't have any segregated schools anymore, but we have the attitude that was there then that's still there and still resonating." That's why I'd say to us that when we look at history, we need to look at the Southern Manifesto. I'm telling you now, that they said that they were going to resist, period. And it's been sixty years since nineteen fifty-four, so we know what that is, we know what that is. And we need to make sure that we keep it on.

02:54:39:00 But I'm, I'm just- you know, he was a person. He was like all the people I'd worked with, and that they were part of my family, that's my family, the movement veterans of the nineteen sixty era and SNCC in particular, but there were some in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and CORE and the NAACP that I felt very close to and that's what got me through, that's what got me through. That's got me through when I was in prison. That's what got me through when I was under fire, gunfire. That's what got me to when it got lonely and testy. Those are the kinds of things that got me through most of my experiences. And I always look at those like Doctor King and Ella Baker and, you know, Conrad Lynn, and there are a lot of others who, you know, the Stokely Carmichaels. All of them were older than I were- was. All of them was older than I was and they- I looked up to them and I tried to gain those qualities about them and those principles that they believed in, were the guiding principles that kept them moving. And some the world view, to be able to learn as much as I possibly could and understood that I had a consciousness and I had, I had a person- was a person and I needed to be respected for that, and so I don't change in that quality. I think it was the best experience I could've ever had. I couldn't have gone to any better university than I did with SNCC and it took me to places I would've never seen had not it been for SNCC. And it put me in, in with the most influential people that I have ever come in contact with and, and, and it brought me into ordinary people and learning to live and love and experience some of that joy and happiness that everybody else trying to enjoy in this life.

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

CLEVELAND SELLERS INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

02:57:01:00 END OF INTERVIEW