Gwendolyn Zoharah-Simmons – “Organizing”

One of the things that often took a lot of our time was after we would have spent our day canvassing, doing the freedom school, whatever, organizing, then we had to have our staff meetings, you know and sometimes these would go on for hours, and where we were trying to address and addressing these differences amongst ourselves, that grew out of race, gender; that too was an incredible period of learning how you organize groups of people who are doing the work. I mean, I was the same age as almost all the volunteers; for the young males it was hard for them to have a woman as the project director. I think in Mississippi there were three of us across the state. I was certainly finding my way. I mean, you know, I had certainly benefitted from all of the leadership work I had done in my high school and in my church, but hey, there was nothing like this, you know. And for me to feel confident enough to assign people, and when they didn't want to do it, try to convince them that they had to, you know. There were some rough spots, no question about it. Trying to school northerners on southern, black southern mores; you know there were racial tensions, without a doubt. The people in the community often would give the white students a lot more praise, attention. When they would invite us to dinner they wanted them to eat first. They would give them the best part of the chicken. So then when we'd get back, I'd say you had no business letting that happen. "What did I do wrong?" "You were playing into this whole thing of them thinking whites are better than blacks and you should not participate in that."
Gwendolyn Zoharah-Simmons – “Mississippi Voting”

Of course, in the state of Mississippi for the most part, African American people could not register to vote. There were all kinds of ways to prevent that from happening; from just sheer terror to you know counting the number of marbles in a jar, and just all kinds of ridiculous things, so one of the plans that we had for Mississippi’s Freedom Summer was that we were going to show to the world, particularly to the United States, that if black people could register to vote, they would. They would register, and they would vote. And the way we opted to do that was to have mock voter registration, so that people could come and register in a safe place. We would have all the forms, and there would be no repercussions. And then we were going to have elections where they would vote for delegates to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. People understood that we were planning to challenge the regular Democratic Party for those seats, in Atlantic City, where the Democratic National Committee -- Convention was being held. So people knew what we were doing. They knew that this was a plan for us to take over the Democratic Party in the state of Mississippi, if we could, and they were all for it. So to me, this was, I mean you know one of the things we taught in the freedom schools was about citizenship you know, and the Constitution and what it meant, and how the government operated at the national level, at the state level. So we had to do a lot of teaching people what it all meant, why voting was so important. And believe you me, those folk who were already a part of the NAACP and activists, they knew. They were very aware. And some of these men who became involved were veterans, so we had that kind of grouping of people there. So it was just an incredible exercise and on the days of the elections, just to see people coming and the box sitting there and people putting their ballots in there, and you know we had refreshments; it was like a very festive kind of occasion and the fact that we had, as a part of our freedom school, literacy classes. So we had people who didn't read or write coming in the evenings to learn how to do that. But the hunger for knowledge that people had for how our government operates, for how it should operate, that was so inspiring to me just to see that. And so people were not only from Laurel but out in the county -- farmers, and others who came in to participate. So it was just so inspiring, just wonderful to be a part of that, and what it taught me about the power of people if you give them information, if you give them just a little bit of help.
Gwendolyn Zoharah-Simmons – “Civil Rights Beginning”

My grandmother, my mother, my father, they were there begging and pleading with me not to go, because they said, "You're going to be killed. All of you are going to be killed. Are you crazy? Mississippi is the worst hell hole for black people. There's no way they're going to let you come in there and do anything. So these SNCC people are just going to get you killed, and whoever this Staughton Lynd person is," you know, "he's a white man, right?" This is my grandmother. "They're not going to kill him; they're going to kill you, though." Then to add insult, she said, "And they're going to rape you before they kill you." You know. So, I was scared, no question about it. But it was, um --- and then the final thing was, "if you go, don't ever come back". So. And my mother and father backed her up in that. And so I left with my girlfriend, Geraldine, who drove me to the Greyhound bus station to get my ticket and to go back to Atlanta, and I cried all the way because I think after my ticket I might have had about five dollars left, and here are my parents and grandmother telling me if I leave, don't ever come back. So when I get to the Atlanta bus station, there's Staughton and Alice Lynd with their two kids, waiting for me. And they could see that I was all swollen up from crying and all, and they just welcomed me with so much love and took me home, and they said it'll be alright. They'll get over it. And that was the beginning of my full time work in the civil rights movement.
Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons – “Young Activism”

It was clear I was going to college; it was foremost in my mind. And I needed money, you know? Many of my friends in the summer would go and pick cotton or work in the fields, and my grandmother wouldn’t let me go. Her thing was, 'I've picked enough cotton for you and me, and you're never going out there. Ever.' But I wanted to go, because I kept saying, "Well my friends are going." And she was like, "I don't care who's going; you're not." So then I said well I have to find a job, I need money so I can buy clothes, you know to go off to school. And she sort of said ok, you can go looking. I don't think she really knew what I had in mind, and that was to look in the paper for job openings. And they were openings for file clerks and retail people and the like, and really I don't know what I must have been thinking about because I hadn't seen any black people doing that kind of work. But nonetheless, I went into midtown Memphis looking for these kinds of jobs. they would say, "It's not for you, not for you girl. This isn't, we're not hiring people like you."

This was the beginning of me really understanding what it meant to be black in Memphis in the south. My eyes were beginning to open. They didn't want to hear anything about the fact that I was trained to do things. It was like the minute they saw me, this was not the kind of work for me. Oh, I was deeply hurt. I had a lot to offer. So the fact that these people didn't care, didn't want to know, it was very painful. This was really the thing that I now think set me on the path to the civil rights movement was that after the third or fourth day of this, I had left the place where I had gone into trying to get a job and was standing out waiting on the bus that would take me back to the black neighborhood I lived in, and a storm came up very quickly. And back in those days people would say to you, at least in my house, that God is working when it is thundering and lightning, and you need to get inside and be very quiet and very still until the storm passes. Well there was no place for me to go back into. And I was out in the elements, and I don't think I'd ever been out in the elements when it's thundering and lightning, and I was getting soaked. And this was really when I felt like, I don't belong -- do I belong here? This is not even my country, is it? I don't belong here. I have nowhere here that's mine. And it was very, I was so upset. And when the bus came and I was soaking wet, I got on the bus, and for the first time in my life I sat on the front seat. And I had no plan, I just sat. And my feeling, when I think back on it, was that I'm a human being and I have a right to sit here, and I'm not getting up. Now when I got on the bus there were no white passengers, but there were black passengers who were sitting in the back. And the black people who were sitting in the back started saying 'Please don't do this. Come on back here. What are you doing? Don't start any trouble, please.' And the driver said, "You'd better get on back to the back where you belong." And I didn't move, and I just think that as I best remember, that I was ready to fight for that seat. And when white people got on the bus they of course could not sit down, even though there
were many seats, because the rule was you cannot sit behind a black person. So that meant they were wet, dripping, just as I was, but they had to stand. And they kept saying to the driver, "Make her get up." I actually got to where I was to get off, without being attacked or arrested, which was amazing. When I got home and told my grandmother what I had done she practically died, and she said, "You're never going looking for work again. You have lost your mind. You must be crazy."