

Jane Stembridge – “Mississippi Kid”

I keep thinking of this kid in Mississippi. We were marching; this was in Greenwood. I don't remember the details but we were holding hands and singing Ain't No Harm to Keep Your Mind Stayed on Freedom. And this young, and we were all young but this guy was like 12 or 13 and he had my hand. And he was always around the SNCC office and so forth. And here coming at us were Chief Curtis Larry and the police, and I think they had some dogs. Anyway it was a very scary moment. And Willie James said, Jane I've got to go. My grandmother wants me home, it's past suppertime. I said you're not going. And I held as tightly as I could. Because I knew if he left-- I knew if he stayed he might be killed or what, but I knew if he left he would always have a profound regret. It was one of those times. And he stayed.

Jane Stembridge – “Grandmother”

My mom and my brother and myself were at her mother's home, which is a very traditional home in a small town in South Carolina, or my brother and I were there by ourselves for a month or whatever, or the whole family was there often too. And that was the old south. There was a woman who came to work for my grandmother every day, and who did the cooking and the cleaning and the ironing and all of that. And then at the end of the day, in that terrible South Carolina heat, I would see, as a little child I would see her. And she was, she may have been our wet nurse, I don't know. You hear all these stories so much from the south and it gets kind of nauseous, but we were very close to this woman, physically. And she would walk home at the end of an incredibly hard, hot day. She would walk down the railroad track, literally, to the little cabin, little house where she had her three children. And in her hands she would be carrying a little paper bag or something with the chicken necks, the chicken backs -- that really was true, and maybe a biscuit or two that was left over and somehow she was going to feed whomever was at home with that. I didn't understand, and I was -- And I'm not saying this to try to make myself look good or like way back as a child I was committed to civil rights, I'm not saying -- it's just that I loved her so much. And there were other, there were other black people in the community that did work -- men and women, their wives -- for my grandfather and grandmother. And my grandmother and grandfather were good people, but this was the wall. And they weren't good on one side of that wall at all. But I was like hurting so bad, just watching her walk home. I just remember that day after day after day, sitting on the steps watching her.

Jane Stembridge – “Baylor University”

I went my first year to Baylor University, and didn't like it, so I transferred to Meredith. And Meredith was at that time a small women's college, still is basically a women's college. And I loved that, because I was gay. I knew I was gay from the time I was four years old, so early on, but not only that but just because women could speak out, women could make decisions, women could run student government and do the newspaper and be important. Because one of the hardest things to me, growing up, and I think particularly in the south was that June Cleaver era, that women who---we had to make our debuts, we had to find a husband, we had to be subservient to that man, and I'm like this is bull*** from the beginning. I couldn't work with that. And that anger and sense of injustice was in me, and I'm sure it propelled me into the civil-- it's part of what propelled me into the civil rights movement, my own sense of repression.

Jane Stenbridge – “MLK at Union Seminary”

Martin Luther King came to Union Seminary, I think it was probably March of 1960, and just blew the roof off of that academic theological institution, with his talk—speech because he got into the rhythm of his preaching, into his oratory, magnificent. And I was just amazed. So at the reception that followed his message, in that marvelous old gothic chapel there, I went up to him and I said, “Well if I came south this summer, is there something I could do?” Because the students were... and he said, “Oh, yes, Jane.” He was very magnanimous. And he said, “I will put you in touch with Miss Ella Baker”, and did so. And then Ella put me in touch with Connie Curry and I came. I finished the year, and my idea was just to come down to Atlanta for the summer and then go back to Union. But that never happened. I eventually got the degree, but many years later, elsewhere. I was going back to seeing that woman walk down the railroad tracks. It was an immediate personal, unresolved grief. And it was not political, it was not--- I mean you know, essentially. It was now maybe I can ease this pain, you know. And I had no idea what I would do in Atlanta or what he was thinking or what Ella Baker would do. But we worked into that. And he resonated what my father, I mean my worlds kind of came together. It wasn't just the eloquence, which we all know of Martin Luther King and the commitment, but it was that he was talking about what I had heard all my life but he was talking about it in a way that we could use it, do something with it. Make changes. And in that sense transforming; that was the transforming element I think. Well, mainly what I've said about my early childhood and about my grandmothers and all of that, and spending so much time in South Carolina and Georgia with my grandparents. And my father's home county, Burke County, Georgia at the time was like 85% African American and horrible, horrible conditions. Edgefield County, South Carolina wasn't much better, where mother was from. So it was going home, and I don't mean to sound like it was like my fight, like I had issues I was going to resolve finally. I very much identified with the African American people and that movement, I mean it wasn't just, it certainly wasn't mainly about me. But it was also about me. But basically as I was said, as a child, hurting so much for that, and also as a woman, feeling out of place in the south. And then somewhere back in here in the back of my mind, a gay woman, but that hadn't even surfaced in me so much at the time. Yes, by the time I heard Dr. King, yeah. I felt from Dr. King; let me see if I can follow this thought out first. I felt, after hearing Dr. King at Union-- and of course being at Union, being in that atmosphere, which is full of wonderful, I mean it'd only been a few years since Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a student at Union, so there you have all that, and Dr. King. And I thought there's a power here and we can make a difference, and we can create that community with James Lawson. We talked about the beloved community; we can create it, we can-- black

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people and white people can get together, and all kinds of people, and we can create-- well it turned out to be not that simple to do, because of human whatever. But it did happen. We did create it, and we still are.