

# WOMEN IN THE MOVEMENT

## INTERVIEW THREAD TWO: OTHER LEADERS

### DIANE NASH

"The day four little girls were murdered in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, [Alabama] my husband at the time, James Bevel, and I were in Edenton, North Carolina. SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] had a voter registration project going on there. It was a Sunday and he came into the living room and told me about the murder of these little girls. We were both crying, really. And we decided that an adult man and woman could not allow four little girls to be murdered and do nothing about it. We felt confident that if we tried, we could find out who had done that crime, and make certain that they were killed. We felt that that was one option that we had. Option two was that we get the right to vote for blacks in Alabama, and in that way, they could better protect their children. So, we made a conscious decision, and we chose option two to get the right to vote, and made a promise to ourselves, to each other, and to God, that no matter how long it took us, we were going to work on getting the right to vote.

One thing that's not widely understood is that the murder of those little girls was horrible. And the only thing that would have been more horrible would have been if nothing positive came out of it. But the fact is that the right to vote for southern blacks is a direct result of their deaths. That afternoon, he and I drafted the original strategy for what became the Selma right to vote movement. He was, my husband was responsible for working on the voter registration project that was going on at the time in North Carolina. So, it became my job to present the draft of the strategy that we had written to Doctor King. My task was to ask him to call a meeting of SCLC and make a decision about what we were going to do in response to the murders. The draft we had written was just so we'd have a possibility of something that we could do. It was fine with us if the organization decided to do something totally different or decided to do nothing at all. But our point was let's meet and make a decision.

So, I took the draft to Atlanta. That's where Martin and -- that's where he was at the time. And the first person I saw was Reverend [Fred] Shuttlesworth. And actually, I presented it to him. And his response was, "We'll see what Martin thinks." And then I did find Martin and present it to him. His initial -- well, I should say that the things that we were advocating such as really shutting the state of Alabama down, physically blocking transportation, airports, etc. That what we were advocating was going to take a lot of courage. But there was a whole state of black people who were upset, sad, angry, and wanted to do something. In addition, there were people throughout the country, blacks and definitely non-blacks who were going to be supportive, I felt. But anyway, Doctor King's initial reaction was kind of, "Oh, Diane, get real." And it took us -- well, we were -- and by us, I mean Jim Bevel and me, we worked for the next four months to try to persuade Andy Young and Doctor King to go into Alabama on this voter registration.

Andy was the Executive Director of SCLC at the time. And we were not successful in persuading them. So, Bevel was the director of Direct Action. And he and I decided that he should take a few of his Direct Action staff and go into Alabama and start working. He could have been fired for insubordination, but we felt if he could not get fired for a couple of months, the organization in Alabama, that the Alabama people would ask Doctor King to come over, and that's what happened. In the meantime, I was expecting our second child, and I had a toddler. And we lived kind of on the outskirts of Atlanta. And I made the supreme sacrifice of the family car for him, and his staff to go to Alabama. And I started writing pamphlets, and gathering statistics of, you know, how many blacks were in which counties and, you know, that type of thing. And so, they worked for a couple of months and the blacks in Alabama asked Martin to come in and that was the beginning of the Selma right to vote movement.

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## **MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN**

"I didn't feel I had to make a choice. I mean, there's always going to be a continuum of views and I had -- I mean I knew all my SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] colleagues very well -- didn't agree with them a lot. The role of women in the movement was always complicated and I wasn't somebody who was going to take a lot of guff off of any of them. And, and it was -- you know, and they were my friends and friends disagree, husbands and wives disagree, people in complicated situations disagree, and when some things are moving very slowly, it is the job of young people to be more impatient and to push it. And I remember what it was like to be a young person and to push it. And -- but my job was to get them out of jail, and try to keep them alive if I could, try to keep us all alive."

## **CLIFFORD ALEXANDER**

"Is politician for a bad ending, a bad thing? Yes. That's said. I mean, if you're a politician like we're living through now where it is to denigrate people because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, yeah. That's pretty bad. And you can say some politicians do that. But it is their own particular lack of heart that causes them to do that, it isn't that they are politicians. As I see it, a politician in this world works to achieve a particular political end, and did [Lyndon] Johnson work for that? Yes. Did Martin work for that? Yes. But I think let's continue to remember that it goes well beyond those two people, well beyond it. Now, if you want to take again the black side, if you will, of this, the black leadership side, how did Roy Wilkins, who was somewhat cold, not a sweet backslapper he was, though, very highly regarded by Lyndon Johnson, so he had his ear, he had a chance to talk to him. Or you want to take Whitney Young, who had sort of a combination of both. He could slap you on the back but he also was a practical politician, and he and Margaret Young were vital entries into the whole world of moving things along. Or you want to take Dorothy Height, as few women as they had unfortunately in the movement, she until the day of her death in her late 90s, was sustaining an interest on behalf of black people and on behalf of women."

## **DOROTHY COTTON**

TREY ELLIS (Interviewer):

"I was going to ask about what it was like to be -- about women in the movement. What was it like to be a woman in a movement run by men? And -- you know in terms of feminism, did you think that -- how was Martin -- what was Martin's attitude?"

DOROTHY COTTON:

"Yeah. I -- don't even deal with that junk. Now, when I say, "that junk," it was up in the Delta of Mississippi that Fannie Lou Hamer was up there fighting for the right of black folk to go into public places, use a public restroom, all those -- Fannie Lou Hamer. It was Rosa Parks who decided she was not going to move to the back of the bus -- I don't let people get away with saying anything like that because it's not true. When Rosa Parks would not move to the back of the bus to give a white guy her seat up front, it didn't have anything to do with black, white, it had to do with this woman who said, "I am not going to the back of that bus."

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