JOHN LEWIS INTERVIEW
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John Lewis
Congressman and Civil Rights Activist
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Interviewed by Katie Davison
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START TC: 01:00:00:00

Standing up against segregation in the 1960s

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JOHN LEWIS:

During the 60s we saw segregation. We felt the stain of segregation and racial discrimination. We had to change it. People lived in fear that if they desegregated their lunch counters or their restaurants or their theaters, they would lose business. But it became a moral issue. When young blacks and young whites came together and were saying like, "No more segregation, no more segregation, no more racial discrimination." When people were willing to study the way of peace, the way of love, study the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence, and they said, in effect, "We will not go back, we will not be turned around, we will go forward," it became a moral issue. We were saying we are one people, we are one family, we all live in the same house, the American house, the world house. And as Martin Luther King Jr. said over and over again, and we were deeply influenced by Dr. King and a

young man named James Lawson, that we had a moral obligation to say something, to do something, to speak up and speak out. We may get arrested, we may be thrown in jail, we may be beaten, left bloody, or left for dead, but we couldn't stop. And it became a way of life for many young people. The first time I got arrested demonstrating, speaking up and speaking out against segregation and racial discrimination, I felt free. I felt liberated. I felt like I had crossed over. And it made me a stronger and better person. At one time in Washington, D.C., a few years ago, black people and white people couldn't be seated together on a bus leaving the nation's capital to travel through the South. We changed that. And we were beaten along the way, we were arrested, we were jailed, but we kept the faith. We kept our eyes on the prize. And we were saying, in effect, there would be no turning back.

Everyone can learn and find a way to stand up against injustice

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JOHN LEWIS:

We all can study. We all can be trained to find our way or get in the way. And sometimes I feel there's a force that comes through us, saying, "You have to stand up. You have to speak up. You have to speak out." And when you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to do something. And the teaching of individuals like Jim Lawson, or the words that you read of Gandhi, or the speeches of Dr. King and others that come along, they lift us, they move us and they tell us over and over again if another person can do just that, if another generation can get in the way or get what I call good

trouble, necessary trouble, I, too, can do something. I too can get in trouble for the greater good.

Meeting Reverend James Lawson

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JOHN LEWIS:

I met Reverend Lawson, this smart, gifted man, in about 1958 or '59. He was in Nashville representing not just the Fellowship of Reconciliation, but representing the religious community. Jim was born and grew up in Ohio, came South, almost like a missionary, almost like a nonviolent teacher, a warrior, to spread the good news. He was speaking at a little church in Nashville and he announced during his speech there would be nonviolent workshops that he would be conducting, and I attended one of those workshops. It changed my life forever, set me on a path, committed to the way of peace, to the way of love, and I have not looked back since.

Nonviolence workshops

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JOHN LEWIS:

In those workshops that Jim Lawson conducted, we studied the way of peace, the way of love. We studied the teaching of Gandhi. We studied what Martin Luther King Jr. was all about. We studied the whole idea of passive resistance. We studied the way to love—that if someone beat you, or spit on you, or pour

hot water or hot coffee on you, you look straight ahead and never ever dreaming of hitting that person back or being violent toward that person. And we accepted it, most of us accepted it as a way of life, as a way of living. Made us much better human beings. We had what we called role-playing, or what some people would call social drama. Someone pretending that they were beating you or hitting you. And there were young people that didn't smoke, but they would put a cigarette or something and smoke and then blow smoke in the faces of, in the eyes of some of those people, preparing them for whatever could happen or might happen. It was a way we had been trained, that you absorb the hitting, the beating, but you don't come out of what happened being bitter or hostile or hating or not loving that person. You see the individual as your friend, as your sister, as your brother. And we've heard individuals like Jim Lawson and Martin Luther King Jr. say it over and over again, hate is too heavy a burden to bear. If you start hating people you have to decide who you going to hate tomorrow, who you going to hate next week? Just love everybody. And on one occasion I heard Dr. King say, "Just love the hell out of everybody, it's the better way. It's the best way." Along the way I had what I call an executive session with myself. I said, 'I'm not going to hate. I'm not going to become bitter. I'm not going to live a hostile life. I'm going to treat my fellow human being as a human being.' So, when I was being beaten on the freedom rides or in a march, I never hated. I respected the dignity and the worth of that person. Because we all are human and we must be human toward each other and love each other.

Respecting the dignity of all people

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JOHN LEWIS:

You would, as a person, see one hitting you or feeling the blows, and you have what I called an executive session with yourself. And you said to yourself. You say to yourself, "This cannot be for real. This person doesn't understand." Now, when I was growing up as a child, I fell in love with raising chickens and I think important saw some of these individuals in chickens—that they had to be treated in a special way. People don't come into this world hating people and putting people down because of their race or their color or their religion. People are taught to put others down, are taught to either like certain people or to hate certain people. And I felt, as Jim Lawson had taught us, to be kind, be forgiving, and love and respect the dignity of your fellow human being.

The movement showed political leadership and the American public the urgency for civil rights

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JOHN LEWIS:

The forces of the civil rights movement had sensitized and educated a nation, even the President of the United States. No president or governor could see what was happening and see how people were being treated and continue to look the other way. I remember President Kennedy, along with his brother, the Attorney General Robert Kennedy, saying to us on one occasion, "We now

understand." That was the power of the way of peace, the way of love, the power, the forces of nonviolence to say to elected officials, to say to the larger American community, we can change. We can help create what Dr. King and Jim Lawson called the beloved community. We can help redeem the soul of America and lift America, lift our country, lift our people to higher heights. And that's what the movement did. That's what Jim Lawson and others have accomplished.

1963: The Children's Crusade and the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing

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JOHN LEWIS:

I worked with James Bevel as part of the Nashville student movement and later he became a part of Dr. King's organization in working in Birmingham. The Birmingham movement was a mighty movement. It was a unique effort. It was the ministers, the more professional groups, women. But the moment they got the little children, these little kids, these little children involved, teaching them the way of peace, the way of love, the philosophy of nonviolence, and they start leaving school, slipping out of homes and schools to go and participate in a march. And the mistake that the local officials made, the Police Commissioner Bull O'Connor, was to use the fire department to turn fire hoses on little children, to have dogs snapping the children. It sort of stirred up everything in the African-American community, but a large segment of the white community—not only in Birmingham, but around the

nation. You had to be moved. You couldn't stay silent. It was a test for the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. To watch television and see Bull O'Connor use fire hoses to pick little kids up, knock them up against trees. And you saw young children and young adults trying to hold onto trees, to not be knocked down. Now, the city of Birmingham was referred to or called by people in the movement Bombingham.

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There'd been so many bombings of homes, of churches. And they came on a Sunday morning in 1963, eighteen days after the March on Washington, that a church was bombed where four little girls was killed right after Sunday school. It was a sad and dark hour. I was home in Alabama, visiting myself family, and I got a call to say, "You must go to Birmingham." I took a bus ride alone. An uncle of mine thought it was too dangerous for me to travel by myself, so he made a decision to have me to go a distance away from my home and board a bus so maybe people wouldn't recognize me getting on this bus to travel to Birmingham. And it was in Birmingham that I reconnected with a friend and a colleague of mine named Junior Bond. And we stood in front of the church. It was so sad and so dark. And each time I go back there I would never forget the moment that I stood in front of that church. Never forget attending the funeral of these four little girls. But you cannot stop because of the possibility of violent and someone being hurt or killed. You have to keep going to help redeem the soul of America.

What led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the march from Selma to Montgomery

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JOHN LEWIS:

I think all of those events, the bombings, the beatings, the arrests and jailing during the freedom rides, and the March on Washington, all led to the passing of a Civil Rights Act. Some people said, "Wait. We cannot get it done," but we got it done. We got the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed and signed into law by President Johnson. President Johnson picked up where President Kennedy had left off. And we told President Johnson that we needed a Voting Rights Act and he said, "I've just signed a Civil Rights Act." He said, "But if you want it, make me do it. Make me do it." And we decided to go to Selma, Alabama, where we had been working for several years and go to other parts of the South. In Selma, Alabama, in 1963, '64 and '65, only 2.1% of blacks of voting age were registered to vote. Black people were asked from time to time to count the number of bubbles in a bar of soap, to count the number of jelly beans in a jar. People stood in what I called unmovable lines and we had to change it. So, after a young African-American man had been shot, and later he died, in Selma. He came from the hometown of Mrs. Martin Luther King Jr., Mrs. Andrew Young and Mrs. Ralph Abernathy. And when you're passing Selma, we came together and said we would march from Selma to Montgomery in an orderly, peaceful, nonviolent fashion.

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And so on Sunday March 7th 1965, about 600 of us gathered at a little church. We had a prayer in the church. We had a prayer when we got outside of the church. There was only one person standing—that was Andrew Young, who was on Dr. King's staff—he was standing with his hand up, the rest of us on our knees saying a prayer. And when we finished praying we lined up in twos and started walking in an orderly, peaceful, nonviolent fashion. No one saying a word. As we got to the edge of the bridge, crossing the Alabama River, Hosea Williams from Dr. King's organization said to me, "John, can you swim?" I said, "No. What about you, Hosea?" He said, "A little." I said, "Well, there's a lot of water down there. We cannot jump. We're going for forward." So, we kept walking. I had a backpack on, before it became fashionable to wear backpacks. So, in this backpack I wanted to be prepared if we got arrested and go to jail. I wanted to have something to eat. I had one apple and one orange. I wanted to be able to brush my teeth so I had a toothbrush and toothpaste.

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And as we walked closer and closer, getting ready to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge, a man identified himself and said, "I'm Major John Cloud of the Alabama State Troopers. This is an unlawful march. You will not be allowed to continue. I give you three minutes to disperse and return to your homes or to your church." And Hosea Williams said, "Major, give us a moment to kneel and pray." And again, he said, "Troopers advance." I said, "Major, may I have a word?" He said, "There will be no word," and he said, "Troopers advance

again." You saw these men, all white men, you didn't have any African-American state troopers on the force. You saw these men putting on their gas masks. They came toward us and Hosea Williams said, "John, they're going to gas us." They came with all type of force, beating us with nightsticks, trampling us with horses. I was the first person to be hit. My feet, my legs went from under me. I was knocked down. I thought I was going to die. I thought I saw death. And I said to myself, "I'm going to die on this bridge." But I didn't want to die, I wanted to live. And somehow, and some way, I lived. And apparently a group of young men carried me back across the bridge to the streets of Selma, back to the little church that we had left from. There was hundreds and thousands of people on that side trying to get in, but the church was too small. They asked me to say something and I remember saying, "I don't understand it, how President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam and cannot send troops to Selma to protect people who desire to register to vote." The next thing I knew I'd been taken to a little hospital to be treated by a group of nuns.

Lyndon B. Johnson speaking up for Civil Rights

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JOHN LEWIS:

Lyndon Johnson was a strong, strong leader. He'd been a leader in the Senate, and when he became Vice President he continued to lead. He made a commitment to those of us in the Civil Rights Movement, and to people

around the nation, that he would pick up where President Kennedy left off. And he did, he spoke up for civil rights. He was not ready for another major piece of legislation dealing with civil rights or voting rights to be put on his desk, but he didn't have a choice after Selma. The Congress and American people demanded action and he took action. And when that bill came to his desk after Selma, he responded. He was the first American president to use the theme song of the Civil Rights Movement when he spoke to the nation and he said, "And we shall overcome." I was sitting next to Dr. Martin Luther King Junior in a home in Selma and when he said, "We shall overcome," I looked at Dr. King and tears came down his face and we all cried a little. The President of the United States saying that we shall overcome. We knew it was over. We knew we would get a voting rights bill through the Congress. And later he called out the National Guard, called on the United States military to protect us on the 50 miles walk from Selma to Montgomery.

Lyndon B. Johnson trying to persuade Gov. George Wallace to do the right thing

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JOHN LEWIS:

There was a meeting that President Johnson had with Wallace. I cannot use some of the words that Lyndon Johnson used, but he said to him in effect, 'We two can make history, but we are going a different direction.' And he said in effect, 'George Wallace, you listen to me. You can emerge as a leader, or you can be just a footnote in history.'

Meeting with Lyndon B. Johnson before the signing of the Voting Rights Act

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JOHN LEWIS:

Early during the morning of March 6th 1965[1], and I don't know why he did it, he invited only two of us to meet with him. James Farmer of course, who was committed to the way of peace, to the way of love, committed to the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence, and myself, and we were able to bring an aid with us. We didn't meet in the Oval Office. We met in a little side room and President Johnson just laid back while he talked with us and we listened to him. He said, "I'm going to sign this act." But he said something like this, he said, 'You got to go back and get people registered and turn out to vote. You have to get them by the balls.' He said something else and I won't, cannot, say it for the camera, I think. But he said, 'You've got to get them by the balls like a bull that's getting on a cow, and get them registered to vote.' He was plain and open. And later he had the ceremony for the signing of the bill and he gave several of us one of the pens that he used to sign the Voting Rights Act. I knew then it was going to be a different day, because back in 1957 Dr. King had spoken, so many times he would say, "Give us the ballot, give us the ballot and we will do such a thing, give us the ballot." So, we were getting the ballot. All across the South black men and women could now participate in the democratic process. So, that changed everything forever.

How the Civil Rights Movement changed after Selma

[1] Incorrect date: The Voting Rights Act was signed on August 6, 1965

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JOHN LEWIS:

I think there were people who thought that we had made it, that we had completed the struggle, that the journey was over, and people went in different direction. Selma was the beginning of a new beginning. There was this stress on race and color. There were some people saying that the movement should be just a movement of color and that white people should go and work in their own community. I, along with many of the young people in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Dr. King's organizations, said, we must work together. We've come this far together, we must stay together in an integrated fashion. And later the next year I was de-elected as the head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and another person was elected by the name of Stokely Carmichael. And I made a decision to leave. So, I left this part of the organization and got an offer to work in New York City, and I went there and lived for a year. But almost every two or three weekends I would go back to Georgia and I kept in contact. Junior Bond, my friend, kept me informed.

Divisive forces in America today

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JOHN LEWIS:

Well, I think there are forces today in America trying to divide people along racial lines. There are forces today that are still preaching hate and division and it make me sad. When you see something like what happened in Charlottesville, Virginia. I thought we had come so far and made so much progress, but it took us back to another time and another period. We don't want to go back, we want to go forward and create one community, one America. There's so many forces today that are preaching hate and division. We cannot allow that to happen.

Never give up on each other

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JOHN LEWIS:

There is a great need to believe in something, to have faith, to respect the dignity and the worth of every human being. We were taught during the movement to never, ever give up on your fellow human being. I've seen unbelievable changes, especially in the heart of the Deep South. People are saying things and doing things they probably never really dreamed of. Black people and white people and others are working and pulling together. To get to know George Wallace's daughter has been a blessing for me and maybe a blessing for her. This young woman can teach America a lesson, can teach the world a lesson. The past few weeks, months, year, she been out there pushing and pulling. She was a strong supporter of President Obama. And she tells stories about what her father did and didn't do. And she said in effect from

time to time, 'He never talked with me about what he did or what he was doing.' He owed it to her. She can be an ambassador for goodwill for America, an ambassador of love, an ambassador of bringing people together. I call her a dear friend and she considers me a dear friend.

Finding hope in young people

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JOHN LEWIS:

I find hope today among our young people, among our children, among women. I think there's something brewing in America that's going to bring people closer and closer together. We need leadership now, strong leadership, to speak up, to speak out, to lift us, transport us, to be guided by better angels. We can do it. We must do it. We cannot afford to go back. We have to go forward as one people, one family, one house. I believe in it. I believe we can do it. We need strong leaders, the children, the women, and hopefully some of the men will help us get there.

The struggle starts within

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JOHN LEWIS:

Well, I really mean that within all of us, within all of us there is the spark of the divine that help us, move us, tell us when to speak up or speak out, or when to get in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. This force is part of

our DNA. Maybe it's planted by God Almighty and we have to use it for good, to be the best we can be.

48 Wheeler Ave, 3rd Floor Pleasantville, NY 10570 T 914-238-6800 kunhardtfilmfoundation.org