



JOHN LEWIS INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES LEARNING
KING IN THE WILDERNESS COLLECTION

John Lewis, Board Member, SCLC
May 18, 2017
Interviewed by: Trey Ellis
Total Running Time: 21 minutes and 20 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

00:00:03:00

JOHN LEWIS:

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Learning

King in The Wilderness Collection

John Lewis

Congressman & Civil Rights Activist

John Lewis's Childhood

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INTERVIEWER:

Could you talk about when you first met King? What were your impressions?

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JOHN LEWIS:

I grew up in segregated rural Alabama, and I didn't like the signs that I saw in white and colored white men, colored men, white women, colored women, white waiting, colored waiting. The action of Doctor King inspired me to find a way to get in the way. I've been told by my mother, my father, my grandparents and great grandparents when I would ask questions, they would say, sir, don't get in trouble. Don't get in the way. But I felt like Martin Luther King Jr was speaking directly to me, saying, John, Robert Lewis, you too can do something. So in 1957, at the age of 17, I wrote Doctor Martin Luther King Junior a letter. And I didn't tell my mother, my father and my sisters, a brother's, my teachers. I wanted to attend a little college ten miles from my home called Troy State College. I planned to go there, submitted my application, and my high school transcript. So, I wrote this letter. Doctor King wrote me back and sent me a roundtrip Greyhound bus ticket and invited me to come to Montgomery to meet with him.

Attending Fisk University

00:02:02:00

JOHN LEWIS:



So in September 1957, I boarded a bus. I traveled from Troy, Alabama, rural Alabama, past Montgomery to Nashville to go to school. An Uncle Mine gave me a \$100 bill: more money than I ever had. He gave me a foot locker. I put everything that I own, my few books, my few clothing and that Foot Locker and took a Greyhound bus to Nashville. And Doctor King later heard through one of my teachers that I was in Nashville studying. So Dr. Martin Luther King Junior got back in touch with me and told me when I was home for spring break to come and see him. So in March of 1958, at this time, I'm 18 years old. I boarded a bus. I've traveled from Troy to Montgomery.

Meeting Dr. King in 1958

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JOHN LEWIS:

And a young lawyer by the name of Fred Gray, who was a lawyer for Rosa Park and Dr. King and the people involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott met me at the Greyhound bus station and drove me to the First Baptist Church in downtown Montgomery, pastored by the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, and ushered me into the pastor's study. I saw Martin Luther King Junior and Rev. Ralph Abernathy standing behind a desk. I was so scared. I didn't know what to say or what to do. And Doctor King said, "Well, you're the boy from Troy? You, John Lewis." And I said, "Doctor King, I am John Robert Lewis," but he still called me "the boy from Troy." And he said, you know, if you want to go to Troy State College, we will support you. You may have to sue the state of Alabama. You may have to sue Troy State, but we are prepared to help you. Go back home and have a discussion with your mother, your father. You know, your home could be bombed. Just what you said. Your



home could be burned. Your family could lose their land. You could be beaten. You could be harmed. And I went back and had a discussion with my mother and my father. They were so afraid that something could happen to me, could happen to them and we could lose the land, lose the farm. So they didn't want to have anything to do with my attempting to enroll at the school. And I continued to study in Nashville, and from time to time, Martin Luther King Junior would come to Nashville to speak at Fisk University at the City Auditorium, tell the story of the movement. Rosa Parks would come here, and I stayed in touch with Doctor King, and he became, in a sense, my hero. In a sense, he became my big brother. And he would say over and over, "Stay in school, get an education, and when you finish school, maybe you can come and work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," his organization.

The Freedom Rides, 1961

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JOHN LEWIS:

So I got involved in the sit-ins, went on the Freedom Rides, and the first time I got arrested, I felt free. I felt liberated. I felt like I crossed over, and then a group of us left Washington, D.C. to go on the Freedom Rides. 13 of us. We were beaten. We were left bloody at the Greyhound bus station in Rock Hill, South Carolina, and later at the Greyhound bus station in Montgomery, Alabama. During the height of the movement, it was not just a black movement. There were hundreds and thousands of white Americans, many Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos participating. There were white people beaten and left bloody during the Freedom Rides in 1961. There

were white people beaten in Selma and murdered when we were jailed in Mississippi during the Freedom Rides, more than 400 of us. The majority were white men and women from all across America.

Freedom Summer, Mississippi 1964

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And when we had the Mississippi Freedom Summer, the majority of the volunteers...and I would never, ever forget in the summer of 1964, Freedom Summer three young men, Andy Goodman, Mickey Schwerner, from New York City, white and James Chaney from Mississippi, went out to investigate the burning of an African-American church to be used for voter registration workshops.

The Murder of Chaney, Goodman, and Scherner

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They were stopped by the sheriff, arrested, detained, turned over to members of the Klan where they were beaten and later shot, murdered. These three young men died together. But you couldn't—none of us lived in fear. You couldn't become immobilized by what others was doing or saying. We felt we had a job to do. We were part of a movement and we would not let any person or any group stop us.

Black Power and SNCC programs

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INTERVIEWER:



As the movement started to change. What were those kinds of discussions like with you and King—how did you struggle?

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JOHN LEWIS:

Well, I never really had a long term discussion with Doctor King about the concept or the idea, the philosophy of Black Power. I remember how the term emerged. I was here in Washington, DC. It was during the Howard University graduation. And I believe Adam Clayton Powell had spoken, and he used the phrase, "audacious Black power" and he used "Black power" or "Blackness" 2 or 3 times in this speech. And Stokely Carmichael shared it with me and I think that rang a bell for him. And then he started using the phrase. But in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, we seldom ever used slogans or rhetoric. We believed in programs to one, two, three, the ABCs of doing this or doing that. So I never really used it.

Poor People's Campaign

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INTERVIEWER:

Afterwards with the idea of the poor people's work. Were you part of any of those discussions?

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JOHN LEWIS:

I remember very well being at one of the meetings, discussing the Poor People's Campaign. At this time, I was serving on the board of the Southern



Christian Leadership Conference. We met at Pascals in Atlanta, where Doctor King brought a group representing those that had been left out and left behind. There were low income whites, low income African-American, Latinos, and Asian American and Native American all meeting together, preparing to take their issues, their concerns and the needs of poor people to Washington to camp out. People were ready. People were prepared to go and stay a while. And at the same time there was a struggle going on in Memphis.

Influence of Jim Lawson

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JOHN LEWIS:

Doctor King hadn't planned to go to Memphis, but a young man by the name of Jim Lawson, who became our teacher during the preparation for the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides. Jim Lawson was one of these brilliant young Methodist ministers who had studied a philosophy and a discipline of nonviolence. Doctor King used to come to Nashville and speak. He has so much love and admiration for Jim Lawson. This young man was smart. He had studied Gandhi. He had studied Thoreau and civil disobedience. He prepared us. So, when Doctor King would come in and salute the Nashville movement, he would say Jim Lawson had a greater understanding of the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence than anyone he knew.

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INTERVIEWER:

Let's jump to the assassination of Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy.



Dr. King's Assassination, 1968

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JOHN LEWIS:

In nineteen sixty-eight, I was in Indianapolis, Indiana organizing for Bobby Kennedy. And a group of us were planning a rally in a transition neighborhood, this outdoor rally. And there was some debate about whether Bobby Kennedy should come and speak. Some of us had heard that Doctor King had been shot, but we didn't know his condition. And I, for one, kept insisting that Bobby Kennedy had to come and speak to the crowd that were waiting, and he did come and speak. It was Robert Kennedy who announced that evening on April fourth, nineteen sixty-eight that he had some bad news. He said, in effect, that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, and a hush came over the crowd. Some people cried. And I said to myself, "Well, we still have Bobby." And I started crying a little and a little more, 'cause if it hadn't been for Martin Luther King, Jr, I don't know what would have happened to me growing up very, very poor in rural Alabama. Doctor King had provided a light for some of us, provided hope for some of us. He was the embodiment of our future. When Bobby Kennedy heard that Doctor King had been assassinated, he was shaken. He invited us that evening to come to his room at a hotel in Indianapolis. We—some of us sat on the floor, others on his bed and we all mourned and cried together. Even...he was shaken, visibly shaken by it all. I think he admired Doctor King. I knew that his brother, President Kennedy, admired Doctor King. They probably had some differences, but I remember the day of the march, the day of the march, when President Kennedy invited all of us, all of the speakers, down to the White House, and he stood in the door of the Oval Office greeting each one of us saying, "You did



a good job." He was beaming like a proud father. When he got to Doctor King, he said, "You did a good job and you had a dream." That was my last time seeing President Kennedy. So, I felt that when President Kennedy was assassinated and later Doctor King, and Bobby Kennedy two months after Doctor King, that something died in all of us, something died in America. Some of that sense of hope and faith died.

Commitment to Nonviolence

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INTERVIEWER:

After the assassination and sort of the violence broke out across the country, how did you feel about that as a position of nonviolence?

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JOHN LEWIS:

Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. would say that the riots became the language of the unheard and somehow, he would say, we have to give people some victory. We have to give people a sense of hope. I never liked violence. Doctor King didn't like violence. I think we grew to accept the way of peace, accept the philosophy of nonviolence as a way of living, as a way of life. It said, in effect, you may beat me, you may throw me in jail, you may even kill me, but I'm going to adhere to the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. And many of the young people, many of the students that came out of the movement, the young people, lived that way. They were willing to put their bodies on the line.



Good Trouble

00:16:38:00

JOHN LEWIS:

During that period of the early sixties, mid sixties, I was arrested, jailed, beaten, left bloody, unconscious. I almost died on that bridge. I had a concussion. I was arrested forty times during the sixties, and since I've been in Congress, another five times, and I'm probably going to get arrested again for something. My philosophy, a philosophy that Doctor King shared, when you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have a moral obligation, a mission, and a mandate to do something, to say something, to speak up, to speak out and find a way to get in the way of what I call "good trouble" or "necessary trouble."

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you feel that there's a period of white backlash now? Is it cyclical?

Promise of America

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JOHN LEWIS:

There's something happening in America today, but I wouldn't necessarily call it "white backlash." I think there is a philosophy or ideology that is moving around. There are forces in America today that want to build walls, but there are other forces that want to build bridges. We're brothers and sisters. We all have to learn to live together on this little piece of real estate we call America or on this planet. And that must be the lesson not just for us,



the adults, but for our children and our unborn generation. If we can get it right here in America, just maybe we can serve as a model for the rest of the world.

Nonviolence Today

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INTERVIEWER:

You've had this commitment to nonviolence to this day, this nonviolence tactic to you personally. You talk about how you've used it recently.

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JOHN LEWIS:

Well, nonviolence, the philosophy is more than a tactic for me. It is one of those immutable principles that you cannot deviate from. It got to be part of your whole being. You come to that point where you respect the dignity and the worth of every human being. And you cannot give up on it if you're going to create what Doctor King called the "beloved community," if you're going to be able to redeem the Soul of America you cannot and must not give up on this concept, this belief, this way of life.

A. Philip Randolph's Legacy

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JOHN LEWIS:

'Cause as A. Philip Randolph indicated to many of us, this unbelievable man who was the dean of black leadership during the sixties, who had this whole idea of a March on Washington during the days of Roosevelt, the days of



Truman, and it all came together during the days of Kennedy. And somebody who was meeting Mr. Randolph would say over and over again, maybe our foremothers and our forefathers all came to this great land in different ships, but we're all in the same boat now. Doctor King put it another way. We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters. If not, we will perish as fools. And Doctor King probably would say something like this today; it doesn't matter whether we're black or white, Latino, Asian-American, or Native American, we're one people, we're one family, we all live in the same house, not just an American house, but the world house.

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