



DIANE NASH INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES LEARNING
KING IN THE WILDERNESS COLLECTION

Diane Nash, Field Organizer, SCLC and SNCC
July 14, 2017
Interviewed by: Trey Ellis
Total Running Time: 30 minutes and 52 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

00:00:04:00

DIANE NASH:

People often say, oh, you are so courageous and fearless. And I have to laugh because that is not the case at all.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Learning

King in The Wilderness Collection

Diane Nash

Civil Rights Activist

Explaining Nonviolence

00:00:28:00



INTERVIEWER:

You called nonviolence the greatest invention of the 20th century. Can you talk about that?

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DIANE NASH:

Nonviolence. Well, I'll put it this way. There is no greater invention of the 20th century than nonviolence because it allows us to fight warfare without violence. To us, it gives us a method of making social change without killing and maiming our fellow human beings. If we can evolve it into well, it provides us with the opportunity to evolve a step higher as human beings, into a more advanced species, because what we do now and with all the wars and the killing and the maiming, and as soon as somebody does something that we disagree with, the immediate, reaction is, "well, let's kill them or let's fight them" without stopping to, find out their side of the story. Now, nobody, no group of people, no country of human beings is perfect. And it seems to me that it would just be more logical and less primitive if we said, okay, you know, what's their position, what's our position? And, I tried to come to a civilized, resolution of problems rather than being so quick to fight, in fact, I'm really, disappointed that in this country, some of our national leaders, if they show an inclination to think or talk before they're ready to fight, they get severe criticism from other politicians. That's backwards. That's uncivilized. I hope that, as a result of what Gandhi did and what we have developed in the southern civil rights movement in the 60s, I hope we can be better than that.

Eliminating Segregation



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INTERVIEWER:

It takes a lot of courage to be nonviolent in the face of a violence. For example, you and the lunch counters.

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DIANE NASH:

I get really amused because people often say, oh, you are so courageous and fearless, and I have to laugh because that is not the case at all. I was fearful from beginning to end. I remember having a class that was just before we set in typically. And I think that's the only time in my life that the palms of my hands sweated. But I used to be so fearful in that class, sitting at a lunch counter, with people behind you that you cannot really see, but you know that they're a threat to you is pretty scary, that's one of the things that really bothered me. We were able to summon the courage necessary because segregation was so horrible. So demeaning, so insulting, so degrading that the choice was to carry out this nonviolent movement successfully and eliminate segregation or to tolerate it. I think by 1960, black people were so fed up with segregation. I remember that we said, whatever it takes, we're going to do it. If the path towards eliminating segregation goes through the jailhouse will do it. If it means getting beaten up. We'll do it. If it means risking and even losing our lives. We'll do it. Nobody wanted to suffer or or be injured or killed, but the commitment necessary to displace that social system that had been in place about 100 years at the time. And it was tough and we knew it...we knew that when we started. And so the commitment was, there's only one outcome, and that is the end of segregation. And we'll do what we have to do in order to



achieve that. Another important element in being successful at eliminating segregation was changing ourselves. We changed ourselves into people who could not be segregated. And once you change yourself, the world has to fit up against the new you. That presented a different set of options to the southern white racists. They had to actually kill many of us, or they had to desegregate because they could no longer segregate us. We wouldn't let them.

First meeting Dr. King

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INTERVIEWER:

Could you tell us about the first time you met Doctor King? And under what circumstances?

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DIANE NASH:

The first time I met Martin Luther King was in Nashville, Tennessee in 1960. Lunch counter sit-ins were going on to desegregate lunch counters and restaurants in Nashville. And, he came to give a speech in this university's gymnasium. I was a student at Fisk at the time, and many students from Fisk, and from about 5 or 6 universities in the Nashville area were participating in the sit-ins. He gave a speech. I was, and all of him, like everyone, we met him personally, particularly those of us who were in the, the, sit in movement.

The Selma Marches

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INTERVIEWER:



You're so instrumental with the Selma march. Can you talk a little bit about convincing King to take on Selma or to join this fight?

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DIANE NASH:

The day four little girls were murdered in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. My husband at the time, James Bevel, and I were in Eden in North Carolina, and SCLC 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. That afternoon, he and I drafted the original strategy for what became the Selma Right to Vote movement. My husband was responsible for the vote, 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 a strategy that we had, written to Doctor King. Doctor King's initial reaction was kind of, hold Diane, get real. And, it took us yeah I think 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, on this voter registration. Andy



was the executive director of SCLC at the time, and we were not successful in persuading them. So, [James] 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.

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INTERVIEWER:

Were you surprised at the eventual passage of the signing of the law?

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DIANE NASH:

I did not know exactly what form it would take, but I was not surprised at blacks getting the right to vote in the South because. Bevel and I were not going to stop working on it until it happened or until we died or something. So it was not a surprise.

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INTERVIEWER:

Tell us about the moment when you knew there was victory, and then you felt that you had succeeded.

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DIANE NASH:



Empowered. The success of projects like the like actually achieving the right to vote. It was satisfying from a deep place. Segregation and the being deprived of rights that belong to us was such an outrage and to be able to organize people who needed and wanted a way to express themselves and wanted a way that they could make change was, success and things like that was profound.

Nonviolence as a way of life

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INTERVIEWER:

This idea of nonviolence was questioned by lots of people, including yourself. I mean, can you talk about your decision to leave SNCC and your journey away from nonviolence and back to nonviolence.

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DIANE NASH:

I grew up in this violent society. And, I stayed with those nonviolent workshops in Nashville for one reason, and that was it was the only game in town. There was no other organization trying to eliminate segregation. I really doubted that nonviolence would work. But I also could not just do nothing about segregation. I found it so humiliating. Blacks could not use public libraries. Swimming pools. Hotels. Motels. Restaurants. And it was possible for blacks to buy food at a downtown restaurant. But you couldn't sit down and eat. You had to take it on a carryout basis. So if you went to downtown Nashville during the lunch hour, the blacks that worked in the downtown area would be sitting along the curbs along the alleys, eating their



lunch that they had either brought from home or purchased on a takeout basis from a local restaurant. When I obeyed segregation rules, I felt awful. I felt like I was agreeing that I was too inferior to use the kind of accommodations that the general public used. So my commitment was to eliminate segregation. The Nonviolent workshops were the only organization that I could find that were the only people trying to do something about eliminating segregation. So we had the success of the first couple of years. The lunch counters and restaurants and freedom rides and then the violent poetry was surfacing and people who did not believe in nonviolence. And at a certain point I thought, well, of course, violence is more powerful than nonviolence. And I decided I wouldn't be nonviolent. Well, about a year passed. The only thing that I had done was read a lot of poetry. Have a lot of conversations about how blood had to flow in the street. And, I had not been to the rifle range. Had not learned to make a bomb or let alone used one. I had come to the conclusion that you'd have to be kind of stupid to do illegal things with people that you did not know well. Therefore, it was not possible to build a mass based movement using violence. And when I look back on that year, I decided that I personally was more powerful using nonviolence. So I came full circle and moved from using it as a tactic to using it as a way of life, because it makes sense in so many ways. Usually when people carry out violent movements, they're really trying to achieve something good, achieve a better world. And you don't do that by harming people. If you kill somebody's friend or brother or child or mother or father, it's not going to create good feelings and brotherhood and sisterhood and harmony like people would prefer. Very often, when you...when there's violence the press will cover the violence and ignore the issue.

Organizing against Vietnam

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INTERVIEWER:

Did you return to nonviolence? Sort of. Was that the natural leap to the antiwar movement in your feelings about Vietnam? And can you talk about that?

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DIANE NASH:

I remember seeing a photograph of a Vietnamese woman. She was holding a baby. Baby looked like it might have been a year and a half. Something like that. And part of the baby's flesh was torn away. And exposed flesh was in that photograph, in the expressions on the child's and the woman's face expressed such agony. And I was a young mother at the time, and I really identified with her and how I'd feel if something like that happened to my child. And I decided that if I had the opportunity to help, I would. By that time I had learned, that I had learned because of the civil rights movement and nonviolence that blowing apart the bodies of people's babies with bombs was not the way to solve human problems. Not long after that, there was an invitation from the Women's Union of North Vietnam for American women to travel to Vietnam on a fact finding mission. I was part of the peace movement and was one of the four women who went. We were there for 11 days as guests of the Women's Union. And we toured near Well Hanoi and nearby towns. I think that if the American public knew how and why the war was being fought. They also would be against it and turned out that that's true.



Challenges facing activists

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INTERVIEWER:

After you work with the antiwar movement, did you have another fight?
When was your next fight?

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DIANE NASH:

I worked with tenant organizations in Chicago. I moved back to Chicago. My family was there after I was divorced. I had two small children. I had a number of jobs that were not free. Well, they were a lot tamer, organizations. One of the difficult things for me, then, was making the transition from having been in the South, for example, in Nashville the Central Committee was approximately 30 students and two ministers. And part of our nonviolent training was that a if one person is getting severely beaten, a way that you can try to protect them, is putting your body between them and harm, especially if there's more than one person. But even if there's just one person. It was an extremely unique experience to be part of a group of about 30 people that you loved enough to put your body between them and her. And to have every confidence that they would put their body between you and her. And that was the relationship that existed in Nashville in the Central Committee. And these were the people who were giving guidance to this Indian movement there. When I came to Chicago. I was working with organizations where people were not nearly so committed. For example, I was doing tenant organizing, organizing for particular organization. And oh my goodness, they had so many reports that when there was the funding



agency that I had to do a report for. I had to do a report for the board of directors of that organization. I had to do a report for the board that was in charge of my project, and I had to report to the executive director, and he was always upset because I would get reports in late sometimes and one day in other aspiration. I said to the executive director, who was my boss. I said, "if I just got all my reports in on time and never got in the field and, worked with tenants, you'd be satisfied, wouldn't you?" And he said, "yes, yes, I would, please." That was such a contrast, from working with people who were so committed and to the issue as well as to me personally and me committed to them, that it was just hard for me to make that adjustment.

Civic responsibility today

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INTERVIEWER:

When you tell people to be nonviolent and and social change, you define that. Is that message as receptive today is as you think it should be?

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DIANE NASH:

I'm a patriot. I really think that we no longer have a government of the people, by the people and for the people. I think we have a now and we have a government of the corporations, by the corporations and for the corporations. I'm troubled that we no longer have a free press. We have a corporate press, corporate media. The Supreme Court has ruled with Citizens United. That it's legal for wealthy people to buy politicians. I think we're in a serious place when it comes to the country that our children and



grandchildren and great grandchildren will inherit. And it's up to us to determine what that country will be like when citizens see the roof leaking in their living unit. If they live in an apartment, they call the maintenance crew. If they live in, their own home, they call a plumber. Because they know that if that leak is neglected, that eventually the living unit will become uninhabitable. It's remarkable that people don't understand that that principle is true also of a society, of a country, of a state, of a city, and of a community. The societies don't collapse in a single day or a single year. They collapse over a period of time with millions and millions and millions of flaws. And the flaws are when citizens see something wrong. If you work for a company and you know they're dumping toxic waste in a nearby stream or lake and you do and say nothing, that's contributing to. That's like a leak in the ceiling that's contributing to the fall of this country. If you work in a court and you know that a judge is taking bribes, that's contributing to the downfall of our justice system. And on and on. And right now, all of our systems are imploding. How many American citizens sit in a quiet corner sometime and say, how do I want the education system in this country, or in this state or this city to be? How do I want the economic system here to be? Now, if you don't do that, why would you be surprised when somebody else builds the systems the way they want, then to your detriment? When the G 20 or the numbers change depending on how many governments are represented. But when those summits meet, you know from the beginning they are not going to be making decisions to benefit you. Why aren't you deciding how you want the economic system to work and then going the why don't you go door to door in your block and in your neighborhood and have a meeting of people and make decisions about how you want things to look and how you are going to



Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

get from the point where you are now to the point where you collectively want to be. You have the same equipment that the people who are making the decisions have one head, two eyes, one bring two hands, same internal organs. The only thing that's different is that you don't see yourself as a ruler of this country, in a democracy, or even a republic, the citizens are the rulers of this country.

END TC: 00:30:52:00