



XERNONA CLAYTON INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES LEARNING
KING IN THE WILDERNESS COLLECTION

Xernona Clayton, Friend and Organizer, SCLC
March 28, 2017
Interviewed by: Trey Ellis
Total Running Time: 32 minutes and 20 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

00:00:04:00

XERNONA CLAYTON:

Doctor King, I think, felt in his whole soul and body that he had to do what he did. And so I think he was the most unique person who ever walked.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Learning

King in The Wilderness Collection

Xernona Clayton

Civil Rights Leader

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you tell us about the first time you met Doctor King?



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XERNONA CLAYTON:

I met Doctor King, and, I don't remember the years, but, you know, early on in his career, he was a Baptist minister who attended the Baptist conventions, as did many ministers. I was very active in the church and went to the conventions, and one year I met him. But at that time he really had not achieved fame necessarily. He was a young minister, and I remember how vibrant he was, but it wasn't really that memorable. It was later on that I kind of put all this together. But I do remember, real fondly and clearly, the first time I had real personal contact with him. And what I remember about him is that his sincerity was apparent. His love was obvious. And his dedication was very, very, very apparent. He talked so passionately about the work he wanted to do, and that was the memory I carry with me all the time. How impressive he was when you got a chance to have an engaged conversation with him.

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INTERVIEWER:

What brought you to the SCLC and working so closely with him?

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XERNONA CLAYTON:

He did. Doctor King. Well, he was looking for a public relations person who would help write speeches, help do public relations for SCLC. And, he knew and felt the growth of the organization that it needed expansion. Someone



who would do those kinds of things, make the organization more relevant to the public. So he was on a search for a good, strong PR person. At that time, I was married to Ed Clayton, who was the editor of jet magazine and known very well in the journalistic circles as a man with great ability. He was creative, he was smart, he was quick, he was fast, and came to Atlanta with a 2 to 3 month agreement. And in a very short time, Doctor King said, I knew the first day he came he was a man we wanted. As I said, he was so creative. He right away gave them ideas and suggestions as to what he thought he could do to get the message out about the work of SLC.

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INTERVIEWER:

If you could talk a little bit about when you encountered someone who didn't like his work.

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XERNONA CLAYTON:

Doctor King demonstrated, as I said immediately, the seriousness to which he was going to fight the cause of justice. When you are around him all the time, he expressed what his goals were, and we got a chance to hear the rationale for his commitment. He had met Gandhi and he said Mr. Gandhi had the right approach to nonviolence and peace and love. And through his meeting and his readings and his teachings, he was convinced without a doubt that this is the only way to go. You must be nonviolent. You must be peaceful, you must be loving, and you must be committed. And Doctor King demonstrated that he meant it sincerely and deeply, that we must fight these evils in our society,



poverty. Injustice, maltreatment. And he said, we can do it with a plan, a plan of love. And I couldn't believe really, even though I'd seen a little of this, I couldn't believe the man was so committed to nonviolence. I had been in his presence when a man spat on him, just spat all over his face, and that would just make anybody mad. It conjured up in me anger, and I kind of wanted to fight myself. Doctor King, who never, ever showed any signs of retaliation, would just do the same thing all the time. Just take his handkerchief, wipe the sputum and say, this convinces us that we got a lot of work to do and just keep on moving. Keep on moving. Once you saw that over and over and over again, you became thoroughly convinced that he was a man who practiced what he preached.

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INTERVIEWER:

From your point of view. What was the hardest part about being Martin Luther King? The weight, did you see that weight on him?

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XERNONA CLAYTON:

The darkest moment for him was when he made the speech about his position on Vietnam at Riverside Church. His world changed because the people around him changed. They stopped giving. They stopped calling, they stopped caring. And he was devastated. And he would say to those of us who are close to him, I cannot understand this. I don't understand why and how people who knew me didn't quite understand that I can't condone killing in any form. He said, you expect your enemies to disagree with you. You expect



them to go against and in opposition of what you're doing. What I didn't understand is how our friends were leaving. And it just really killed him. He just walked around aimlessly. It looked. But I know for certain, because he talked to me, that it had bothered him deeply, that the nation had turned against him. As a matter of fact, I can say now that he never got over it, because this was January that we were talking and he was assassinated just a few months after that. And I always tell people he died of a broken heart. But on this birthday, January 15th, 1968. When some men who were working at the church at this meeting had gotten together and said, let's call your Xernona, and ask her to come over when we take a break and see if she can get him to laugh. We got to see him laugh. He hasn't laughed in a long time. So they called me and told me their feelings like, please come over and think of something to do to make him laugh. Well, I said, I can't be funny at the spur of the moment, so I need more time to plan some humor. But they said, no, we need you to come. It doesn't matter. Just come on over. Well, I went reluctantly, because I couldn't think of what I needed to do to make him laugh. But as I, you know, just wanted to follow through on, the need to do it. As I was going out of my house to get in my car, I went through the kitchen and I saw some items that I had gotten out of a gift basket. Well, one of the things I picked up was a little gold can, very similar to what used to be a beggar's cup. And, but it was all gold and kind of fancy, but nevertheless a little cup. And I said, Doctor King's...I reached into my bag and I said, I brought you a cup, because you're always talking about helping President Johnson fight the war on poverty. So now you can take the cup and go out in the corner and collect money and send it to President Johnson, which is your way of helping me? Well, he laughed, and it wasn't a smile. It was laughter.



And then I said....I reached in the bag and brought up this can of shoestring potatoes. And I said, you always go to jail. So take this can of potato chips. I mean, a string of potatoes. And when you go to jail again, you'll have something to eat. And he just really falls out with laughter. And I did this, enough times to bring out some things, and he's falling over the desk with laughter. And then I said, well, and now I have a cake. And this is your birthday, so happy birthday. Well, when the evening ended, the meeting resumed. But everybody now is so relieved because now we've gotten the laughter back and, oh, he just stayed up, up, up throughout the rest of the evening. They were jolly. And he was fun loving and everybody loved him. As wonderful as Martin Luther King was, one of the things that annoyed me and everybody around was that he was always late. Never on time. Now he would keep pressing people waiting. He had a press conference, 10:00 didn't mean a hill of beans. He's going to be late. But what was interesting about that tardiness is that they would wait, because they probably figured if when he gets here, he's going to give us something. So he was kind of, like, worth waiting for. But I said to him one time, why are you late all the time? And it bothered me because I'm such a timely person. I mean, I can't ever be late and trying to do something with him was so annoying because he was just...I think he planned. Oh, I'm going to be late. So one time he said, you know, everybody always has nice things to say about you, but I just believe there's some things that you just can't do. Everybody thinks you can do everything. He said, but I bet there's something you cannot do. I said, what is it? He said, I bet you can't cook. And I said, well, I wouldn't go down in the record books as a great cook, but I can prepare a meal. He said, you may have one that you could cook. I said, I will cook, I can find something, I can cook. And he said,



well, okay, set up for dinner, probably going to have a dinner party. I said, okay. I said, but under one condition, that you're not going to ruin my meal by being late. But sure enough, so he planned it all up. So the day he was to come to my house for dinner and I did fine, but I had to get help because I really didn't know how to cook. But I found something that I could put together. And, he liked pork chops. That was one of his favorites. So one of my church members showed me how you fix pork chops, and I did the work until I really could honestly say I did it. But I had help with how to prepare pork chops. So he came, I think. I don't remember the time, but I'll just pick a time. Like dinner is going to be at six. Martin surprised me by coming in by like 4:30. And I said, oh my gosh, I did put the fear in you. You are here early. And so which means you're going to be at the table on time. But guess what? He was late because he went into the back room, got on the telephone and talked to 100 people on the telephone. And at 6:00, which was dinner time, I had to threaten him with his life, not to make another phone call, that he's already late for dinner. It came in and he was late. I asked him, Lord, you mess this up. And, he said, well, I know you didn't cook it anyway, so it'll be okay. So, he was late for the dinner he said he wouldn't be late for. And it impressed me beyond any reason that he was not going to be on time, but come in early. Just blew my mind. But she still was late.

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INTERVIEWER:

How did you hear about the assassination? And were you with Coretta when you heard?



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XERMONA CLAYTON:

I had dinner that evening, with Calvin Craig, the grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan, with whom, I had made headlines because, the story was that he got out of the organization and credited a black woman with changing his whole mode of living. And I was that woman. And, that story's the story that came later, but Martin knew that he and I were having meetings together, and I was trying to change his ways. Martin never knew what ultimately happened. But anyway, I was there having dinner at a restaurant. The maitre d at the restaurant knew of our relationship to the King's. Everybody did. And so she came and brought me a note that said, you know, did you hear what happened to Doctor King? And, I just kind of folded the note up and kept talking and ignored her. When she came back, she said, oh, I hate to interrupt, but according to what my reports are, it looks like something bad has happened. I decided to go to the telephone. I went to the phone and called their private numbers and all of them were busy and that was unusual. And I said, well, maybe something did happen. But I couldn't get through. So, Mr. Craig drove me to the house, and as I drove up to the house, she was in the police car with the mayor, and they were backing out of the driveway. She said, oh, I've been trying to reach you. She said, I've got to go to Memphis and I hope you'll just kind of look after the children for me. Well, as you know, what happened is she got to the airport, and while she was there, she got the call that he had, in fact, died. And she turned around and came home. So I was still there when she got there. But, I saw Coretta's strength. I'd seen it before, but I saw it glorified at this moment. She didn't shed a tear except her daughter, Yolanda, who was the oldest of the children, had been out to a



friend's home and got the message and of course, came home, and the two of them embraced under the bed. And rocking and crying, "We're not going to cry because we're big girls," this is what Yolanda sang to her mother. "We're not going to cry. He wouldn't want us to cry. Daddy would be disappointed if we cried. He wants us to be big girls." Now a lot of decisions had to be made. Just so many decisions. One of the things she asked me to do was that one of her housekeepers was going to take care of the children's clothes, like to be sure that they are dressed properly for whatever we do. And I want you to take care of me. And. And then she talked about her headdress. She said, I don't want to look like Jackie Kennedy, but I want to be covered. So whatever you come up with, you do it. See what I think of it? So I called the store one of our leading department stores in Atlanta and asked to meet with the millinery department and told them the nature of my call that I was coming to, get Mrs. King something to wear, and I had something in mind, but maybe they could help me implement it. And would they do it? The manager said, we'll do anything you want. And do you know what time you are coming? And I said, no. He said, well, it doesn't matter. The store closes at 5:00. Whatever. But we'll leave the back door open and you can come in anytime you get ready. We're going to wait till you get here. They said you think you could find the back door, and I laughed, and for the first time. Oh, yes, I'm black. I could find the back door. Also, prior to coming to this store near there was a nice women's clothing store and I went in and picked out several outfits for her to wear. So wherever she went, I had something for her to look nice in because now I know she is going to be photographed and she's going to be busy. I said to them, I know I'm getting a lot of clothes, but I have no money. I don't want to bother her for a credit card, and I don't have enough money to pay for all



this. So you trust me to take the things, and then I'll come back tomorrow. Whatever she keeps will pay for, and she rejects I'll bring it back. And he said yes. The next morning, I went down, to take...settle the account. And because I didn't want to think, I was just taking advantage of it. So I wanted to do that early. I went down and I said, I've come to pay my debt. He said, once you've got a zero balance. And what do you mean? I said, all the clothes I took. She likes them all, so she kept them all. Now I'm here to pay for him, he said. Listen. I'm white living in America. I must take some of the guilt and take some of the responsibility of creating an environment that caused all of this happening. The least I can do is cover them with closed costs. They're yours. Zero balance. Thought that was quite a story.

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INTERVIEWER:

We're going to jump ahead to the funeral.

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XERNONA CLAYTON:

We just got a lot of messages conflicting and a lot of answers that Mrs. Kennedy was coming—now not coming. She said she didn't think she could handle the visit. And then she said, no, I must go. And that was gone. Back and forth, back and forth. But the day came when she really was coming, and I was there to witness that meeting. Very, very, very poignant moment. Mrs. King's house is there's a long hallway from the front door to the back of the house, and at the end of the back of it is where Mrs. King's bedroom was, and that's where she spent her private times. So we've gotten the message. Now



that Mrs. Kennedy is enroute. Is definitely coming. So she sent me up to greet her at the front door to escort her back. When those two women met, it was a scene I won't forget. They didn't even say hello. I don't think they embraced and rocked. That seemed like hours. Of course it wasn't, but it seemed like they were communicating. Not saying any verbal words, but just locked. And my take on that, they was saying, we understand. We know your pain. We know the suffering. We know the impact. That was what I said they were saying. They didn't say anything. But the day before the forum was the day of the viewing. Public viewing. I didn't see the body till I got up close. I nearly died. He looked awful. Awful. Meaning he had a big blob on his face as if it were a big piece, a handful of something of clay, and somebody just plopped him upside his head. Awful looking. Well, I was just so disgusted because I had taken many calls during the week from morticians around the country who calls to volunteer their services because they all said the same thing. We want him to look good, look natural, and we are willing to come and provide services free of charge. We won't put our craftsmanship to this and make it good. Well, the family turned it down because Daddy King was a loyalist. And I hate to talk about the the the man, the the embalmer, but it was not a good job. I walked over to the man and quietly, because Mrs. King was standing at the foot of the bell, just, just could hardly stand. Because when you look at it would make it collapse? And she was standing there in such pain .I could see. Or she was something. Now, I didn't want to do anything that would make her uncomfortable more or to add to a grief. So I just quietly stepped over to him, tactfully and quietly asked the question, sir, is there anything you can do with this? Is there anything you can do from a craftsman's point to the side of his face? And then he loudly and quietly said, "Miss. His jaw was blown off. This



the best I can do." And oh she nearly fainted. We all did. So now I think we can have him look like this. So they set out and then my mind got to wandering. Something can be done. So I looked over at Mrs. King Senior, who was Martin's mother, who was dark skinned. Then I looked at, Julie Belafonte, who was white. Then I said, all said, you got some powder as each of them did. They have loose powder and they both did. I said, let me have your powders. And then I was looking for a way to make pale little combination. Belafonte took out his handkerchief and gave it to me. And while I'm standing over the beer, looking at my mixture, looking at Martin's face off, I think I got it. And I dabbed a little on his face, toning it down, and as Coretta smiled, it was working. I didn't know it. I'm just trying something that I knew we had to do something. But it toned down this crash rock of red clay up against his face, turned it down significantly until we could live with it. And Coretta was pleased.

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INTERVIEWER:

Anything else about Martin? The man that was a real surprise to you that you'd like the world to know?

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XERONA CLAYTON:

Doctor King, had such...let's see. How would I call this, a love for people and always want them to be comfortable and put them at ease because, you know, everybody ran up to him all the time. We were walking down the street one day to a restaurant. He and I were going to lunch together, and this man



approached him and he was so excited. I mean, you could just tell he was filled with glee. And now he's personally stand out again walking down the street. Here's his chance to speak to him. And he walked up to me. He said, "Doctor King, you remember me? That I met you? One, one 1st September. We were down in Alabama and I was standing on the steps of the church, and my mama said, tell as to come out here, Martin Luther King, and I want all y'all to meet him. And they said this, my nephew and his name is Billy. You remember that Dr. King." And Dr. King said, "yeah." And he didn't remember. They didn't. First, we didn't have enough facts. I could remember all the people who related in this story. And now we're meeting the grandson of the nephew and doctor King said hello. And he just filled with joy. That guy just skipped away so happily that Doctor King remembered him and so we laughed. I just said, you know what? You an imposter? I said, you know, you don't remember that? He said, no, I don't remember. But let me ask you something. Don't you think it's important that I give that guy a moment of pleasure? It is important to him to remind me that I have met him before, and now he's bringing back the memory, and he's going to just jump up and down a running up and down the street. He's got joy in his heart now. It didn't take anything away from me, but look at him. Gave him all the joy. What's wrong with that picture? And we laughed. But he always wanted to put people at ease, and would just laugh. He was filled with laughter all the time, and all he was waiting for was a moment to let, let it out. And this last Sunday I was with them. As I told about the last Sunday we were together at their home, playing the piano the way it came about. He he he said to me, he said, you know what? I bet you don't really know that that I'm a good singer. Did you know that? I said, no, but I heard you used to say so. Well, I'm good. And he



told me to sit down at the piano. He said, I'll prove it to you, so give me a B-flat. And so I gave him a B-flat. He used to sing it and that, we got the rhythm of a gospel song, and we just had such fun. And he was into it then. I mean, he was given the rhythm of the music and enjoying it and clapping his hands and giving a the ministers. Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. And just really enjoying himself. And it was one of those moments that, we considered the rarities that you just, you know, pocket and put in your back your memory bank of how much joy he had in his heart and how many times. He shared it with others.

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INTERVIEWER:

Marion Wright Edelman called King a true prophet in the religious sense. Do you think of him that way?

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XERNONA CLAYTON:

Doctor King? Let's see. What would I call him? Well, I certainly have to give Marion Wright Edelman credit for a sensitivity to what she would say about him. I think Doctor King was a most unique. If I were to put him in a category, call him the most unique person who has lived. Unique in that he didn't have to get out on the fine line. Now, King could have lived a comfortable life because he came from comfort and being a minister. They have a way of creating comfort. Doctor King created a disturbance because you have to shake it up to get it right. And so he got out on the battlefield because he felt, in his inner spirit, going back to Gandhi, that he had to do it. It was a



compulsion. I have to do this now. That's unique because I think when people feel like they can change the course, because I don't have to take this. And I hear that a lot now I have to put up with this. I don't have to do this. I don't have to enjoy this. I can go to my corner. Doctor King, I think, felt in his whole soul and body that he had to do what he did. And so I think he was the most unique person ever walked.

END TC: 00:32:20:00