



BERNARD LAFAYETTE INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES LEARNING
KING IN THE WILDERNESS COLLECTION

Bernard LaFayette, Staff Leader, SCLC
March 29, 2017
Interviewed by: Trey Ellis
Total Running Time: 27 minutes and 40 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

Nonviolence is not confined to any historical period. So nonviolence today is very effective as well. Some people say, well, it won't work. My approach is that it won't work unless you know how to work it.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Learning

King in The Wilderness Collection

Bernard Lafayette

Civil Rights Leader



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INTERVIEWER:

If you could tell us about meeting Martin Luther King. You know, first meeting him, first impressions and your relationship with him.

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

The first time I met Martin Luther King was actually in Nashville. I was part of the Nashville student movement, and we were, having our sit ins. And we had been, very successful in accomplishing our goals in Nashville. And it was basically because we were trained by James Lawson junior, who was a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School. And he specifically decided to come to Nashville to train in nonviolence specifically for the sit ins. So it was not just in general, but that training he gave us was so basic. It was about, Martin Luther King. It was about Mahatma Gandhi. And he put that together in such a way that, it really resonated towards, our, interests and our passion. And we were all concerned about, the problem of segregation and discrimination, in the South specifically. So when one of the king arrived, to, greet us. It was at, the gymnasium at Fisk University. And after his address, while doing, his, introduction even, actually, he said that, he had come to, Nashville. Not to bring inspiration, but to gain inspiration, because he had been observing our movement and we had learned from his Montgomery movement, and we maintained the nonviolent approach even in the face of violence and that sort of thing. And he was really admiring us. And so that was my first meeting with Martin Luther King.



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INTERVIEWER:

What was your impression when you met him?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

There was something very special about the king. And, it remained until the very day that he died. And that was he was, down to earth. And, even though he was very involved with all sorts of, accolades and that kind of thing, etcetera. And he'd met with a lot of important people, and he was arts, you know, passed on. So, but you never, find that the king was, acting, you know, pompous or anything like that. He was always down to earth. And when he was, when you were along with him, he was very cordial and, very accommodating. And he used to tell jokes. And, in fact, when I work for him and I'm leaving forward now, he, he was the one that was assigned to sit in the front seat of the car when he had to drive late at night to different rural areas. And his job was to tell jokes and keep the driver awake. Okay, so he was very good joke teller and he would, mimic, preachers and stuff like that. So he was capable of doing that, but he reserved that quite a bit. Only in, you know, private moments that he did. But he was very special. And he was. There are some other interesting things about moments of King that you never forgot for a moment that were you are in the presence of somebody who was, very special. Like, for example, when you walked down the street from his house to the office, it was only a couple of blocks, and he would encounter a lot of the, people on the streets who were street people and who didn't have a lot of, you know, resources to take care of themselves. Minus came to pass out of



dollar bills. To them. He would stop and talk to them. So he didn't distance himself from people who were impoverished. And they felt comfortable with him. And, he was treating them as any other human being. But he knew that they had needs. And that's what he was. His life was committed to trying to help them have a better life. That's all mine was. The king was interested in helping others have a better life.

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INTERVIEWER:

How did he get all of you to give so much of themselves for him in this course?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

When you encountered Maratha king, you realized you had number one, someone who was sincere. He was not interested in being, the leader. Actually, this is something very important. Martin Luther King was not interested in being a leader. He gave leadership as an example. But only as much as necessary. And the other thing is, there was just no comparison between his ability to deliver, a message. And what he was saying was not words. Because a lot of people didn't understand his multi syllable words. So that's another thing that people got to understand about Martin Luther King. It was his intonation. More than anything else. They remember some short quotes from my Luther King. But the thing that moved people more than anything else his admirers. King, had the movement within him, and when he spoke, that's why he was able to move others and get them also to have the



movement in them. And it was his intonation and his ability to, to, to get people in tune. With the cars.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can we talk a little bit about nonviolence and how nonviolence is misunderstood?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

Well, the whole issue of nonviolence is, is it varies. And that's important for people to understand that there's nonviolence with the hyphen, which is really an adjective, non violence that is, without violence, the absence of violence. Okay. And that is, a way that people might, interpret nonviolence and. The whole concept with Martin Luther King was advocating was the same as Mahatma Gandhi. And that was a noun that nonviolence is a name of a philosophy or a system of thought, and also a way of life. So my king embodied nonviolence and his approach to dealing with issues. And one of the things that he realized in his gold was to bring about a peaceful, reconciliation. And not just resolution. Sometimes we talk about peaceful resolutions or nonviolent resolution, which means that you separate the conflict in parties and then you don't have that conflict. Between the parties, but the conflict is not going away if it's still embedded in each of the parties did not just engage with each other. So reconciliation is the goal rather than, just simply having, resolution. The concept that we, advocate with King in nonviolence is one that, my mother, King, arrived from many different



sources. Gandhi was one source, but the role was another source. And even Hegel. And that's one of the things that Minister King embraced as he searched for himself. The meaning of truth. What is truth? So from a theological point of view, the king wanted to, for himself, continue to strive towards an ideal society. And for the King, it was the beloved community.

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INTERVIEWER:

Why does this nonviolence that you learned with Doctor King translate to activism today?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

The nonviolence is not confined to any historical period. So nonviolence today is very effective as well. Some people say, well, it won't work. And, my approach is that it won't work unless you know how to work it. So age has nothing to do with the effectiveness. It's a matter of being able to use those techniques and use those skills, and you can accomplish the same goals. And that's when the king lay down. That's why I was universal. It was not confined to any particular area of the country or any country, but it was the effectiveness and had to do with, one single thing. And that was no revolution could ever be one, basic changes unless you were able to win the majority. So when you talk about today, okay, we have a majority in our House and Senate. You have one, political party. But that party is not united. You are able to win the majority of all of the people involved. When we think of the action that my Maschine took back in the 60s and that sort of thing, you got to realize



that, you are able to win the majority of whites. Okay. And that's in the Congress. And that's how you were able to get the bills passed. You never had a majority black on the Supreme Court or the Congress. Okay. But they were able to get those bills passed to make some significant changes. And the same thing is true today. And, so when the Women's March took place and is taking place, that is a thing that's going to make the difference when people come to recognize the fact that, this nonviolent approach, how gay can be used to do that. But you've got to win the majority. And the same thing with the young people. And you don't win the majority by being violent.

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INTERVIEWER:

The election of Donald Trump has been called as sort of the revenge of of the white working class. Could you talk about that?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

My analysis of this is that we are at the end of the second reconstruction period. And we need to be aware of the potential and the, the actions that are taken now to, reinterpret our constitution and laws that exist. What are things that we must become aware of? Is that the laws that we got changed, during the 60s were temporary. That's why they have to be voted on periodically. They were acts, they were not. Actually, our constitutional changes, there were simply remedies for a particular problem that existed during that period. But the assumption is that when that problem was solved, those ax laws that were passed were no longer be necessary. And so therefore



they could simply be removed or ignored. So what change that we make? When you realize that. So we at the end of the reconstruction period now rather you saw that happen okay. Before. And now we're faced with that situation again. Under the new administration, we have those promises that have been made that can be setbacks for us. And, they talk about, the greatness of the past and how we're going to bring the pass back to us. Okay. Make America great again. So that was the greatness that, some people experience in those days. There was not so great for others. And so we have to be aware of that. And we have to teach our young people. That is my urgent concern, is that young people have an appreciation and knowledge of the past and the different stages that we went through and the different phases, and how we were affected by those phases and stages and how now what what should we be doing now in order to preserve what we have gained? And that's not what you have gained, is what you can maintain. And even if you maintain those things, they still have to be sustained. And we have to prepare our young people to be able to appreciate, those, gains and the, the, the things that have to be maintained and how they can be maintained. And they that is good because it's going to affect them. What has happened in the past has been our lives as older people. We've gone through those different periods. And we have suffered those periods, and we have also made some progress and gains through those periods. But this is what our lives were about.

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INTERVIEWER:

Tell me, just personally, about when your peers turned away from nonviolence, but you chose. Doctor King's rap and live that right.



BERNARD LAFAYETTE [00:15:47] Now here's the concept. It's an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. NFL that as citizens we were justified in protecting ourselves First amendment rights. Okay. Also what first law of preservation? Self preservation? Somehow you had the right and authority to protect your life and your family and your loved ones, your friends. Now, there was some problem if you were aggressive and go and attack somebody else. But to defend yourself, that was an order and law, equal justice. Okay. In other words, someone did something to you. You were justified and doing the same thing to them. I found the only problem with that is if someone knocks your eye out and you not there eye out, then. Then knock your other eye out. You can't see how to knock their teeth out. Because he and I were a balanced, negative society. So that sounds, you know, equal justice. Whatever sounds nice and everything but equal justice is not our equal. So my point is, nonviolence says, let's stop knocking guys out. Let's find a way to save our teeth. Let's see if we found another way of relating to each other rather than knocking out eyes and teeth. All right. And then some people are not going to knock your eye out. They're going to shoot you. So what are you going to do to defend yourself? And everybody knows that the strongest defense is a strong offense.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you tell us about the Poor People's Campaign?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

Yes. In fact, the Poor People's Campaign, was, spun out of, minus the King's frustration. When he saw the little children in March. Mississippi. Just, you know, with swollen bellies and stuff like that. And I remember just talk about it. It seems like, you know, we're in a third world country. That's what we called it in those days, third world. And, he thought that more progress would have been made by that time. And he was disappointed. That there was not more progress being made. And so his solution was rather than go around making speeches about the conditions of poor people. He would put the poor people in front of the people who make those decisions. And that's why we call it putting a face on poverty. He wanted their faces to be in the faces of those people who are making decisions about their lives. For example, the food stamps. And that day. If you're going to have a federal food stamp. Well, a federal food program, you have to have, the local, government. Request that and propose that. But also they have to be responsible for the storage and distribution. Without any compensation from the government. And that was one of the conditions for having those the local cities and local, government decided in many cases, like Markham, Mississippi, and other places in rural areas, they wouldn't give them free federal food because in that case, they said that they couldn't get people to work. If they don't get free food, they can eat. And that's all they were able to do in that period. So, therefore, while the food program was available, it was they didn't have access to it. And there were a lot of kind of issues and procedures and things that affected poor people that month that King thought, you know, should be changed. And so his attitude was that, yes, he's done as much as he could to raise these issues, and now the people themselves would have to step forward.



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INTERVIEWER:

Can you talk about? Just personally, did you ever have any personal discussions with him when you saw him down? What was his mood like in this, in this period of his life?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

Well. He wanted to do all that he could do. And, one of the kind of discussions we had with him. In general. He felt disappointed. That more, you know, was not done, and that he was sort of frustrated because he wondered whether or not he could do any more than he had done. We were in a staff meeting in, Atlanta and might get a call from Memphis. And when you think about the sanitation workers, they were what we call the working poor. So all the poor was not like unemployed. Some people working very odd, two jobs even, and they still well below the poverty line because of the wage was so low. So these sanitation workers were really is dragging on track because of the wage. But it was a safety situation where one had been, you know, seriously injured. And they were trying to get, you know, some support and protection while the march broke out in violence. That's when, we all went, to Memphis for two reasons, to support the sanitation workers march. So it would be nonviolent, but also to continue our discussion how the Poor People's Campaign be right there. So when we arrived, we had to, get ourselves mobilized so we could do that. And there was a mass meeting. Okay. At, Mason Temple Church. And, Martin Luther King was, scheduled to go and



... speak, but it was pouring down, raining. But it was raining when we used to call these cats and dogs. So we in 306 and Martin Luther King is already in his pajamas in bed. And we were working on a press statement for Washington, DC, because that was scheduled to go and do the press conference, opening up the headquarters for the Poor People's Campaign. King was scheduled, but he could go. He had to do the march over again. So he was sent in me so we could stay on schedule. So what happened is the next day, that morning, we got up early and we were working on a statement again. And when we finished, tweaking the, press statement, my king said to me, now, but not the next, project we're going to work on. Is, to institutionalize and internationalize nonviolence. Comma to be discussed. And then told the press conference. Non-sequitur, I said, okay. So I went, then, I got ready and went to the airport later on. And when I arrived at the airport. Find Roy Walt fans. I was not there to pick me up. I called the office and found out that there was a riot in the streets. And. Washington, DC. Because he said that, minus King had been shot.

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INTERVIEWER:

After the assassination. When you return to Atlanta, can you talk about the scene when you. When you arrive back here at the office and then the planning for the funeral?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:



I was on my way to the half funeral, coming down over an avenue, and I had to pass the office. And office door was open. Our sales office and people were bringing things out of there. I was, you know, a program administrator at the top, one of the top administrators. I knew the office was supposed to open. So I went across the street over there and sure enough, it was a test of nonviolence. These people were taking things off the wall, off the desk and everything else, and I had to calm them down because they were frantic and they were wailing and moaning and groaning. So we're not like thieves. They were people who had felt they had lost Martin Luther King, and they were just trying to find something they could hold on to. That moment, King, perhaps it touched. And would you know that? It's, sort of a country thing, but sometimes, even the executives who grew up in a country when they got to their desk all day, you know, sitting at a desk. You know, take off the shoes. So there's somebody who think that they have Martin Luther King shoes because they were under his desk, but they're Abernathy shoes. Okay. And. I managed to get most of them to put the things back and come on at the office, and I made sure was locked. But I missed a funeral because I was working in the office. Trying to preserve okay. These things. So that's just another sad thing that happened. But I got the time to see Robert Kennedy and some others come out of the church, and, but the wagon, it. Okay. Gone off.

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INTERVIEWER:

How do you want him to be remembered now?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

Martin Luther King and his teachings are still have an effect. It's multiplying. So it's not a thing of the past. That's the thing that is so amazing. It's not only. It's not a thing of the past. It's what will help preserve our future. And my prediction is that in the present crises that we have facing now in this country and in the world, those who would rely upon the teachings of Martin Luther King. Whenever they find a way to make peace with each other.

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