



C.T. VIVIAN INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES LEARNING
KING IN THE WILDERNESS COLLECTION

C.T. Vivian, Director of Affiliates, SCLC
April 12, 2017
Interviewed by: Taylor Branch
Total Running Time: 23 minutes and 37 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

00:00:04:00

C.T. VIVIAN:

Everybody wanted a means and a method whereby we could beat racism at a higher level. And without — and keep the faith because that was terribly important. The only thing that we had was Christianity. The only thing that white — that white America allowed us to have was our churches.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Learning

King in The Wilderness Collection

C.T. Vivian

Minister and Author



00:00:55:00

INTERVIEWER:

Can you tell us about the first time you met Doctor King and what you remember of that encounter?

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C.T. VIVIAN:

Martin... I had not met Martin King, and he had been invited to Fisk in order to be honored by the school, because of what he had already achieved. It was right after he had won the high award for the nation. And, as a result of that I — and I was an editor at the Sunday School publishing board of the National Baptist Convention. My wife and I already knew nonviolence and she, in Michigan and I in Illinois, and so we really wanted to build him up and to be able to use this as a means of making nonviolence the means that we were all used to fight racism, in particular. But you know, you hope for more than that. But that's enough to hope for, really. And so, I was in the park, right across the street from Fisk and wanting to make certain that I got to talk to him. And, after the meeting, he came over and he had given a speech at Fisk that every speech he gave was terribly important. And here was my first chance to talk to him. And, in fact, I hadn't seen him before this. And then here was this man that didn't talk much. Martin didn't talk much. He listened to you though. He didn't miss what anybody was saying, at any time. It was just he and I, but Martin wanted to know what you thought or was thinking. And, so — and this was right after he had received the award and he had come over to the park. As a result of that, we got into a major conversation and also got to talk about nonviolence in a way that very seldom did anybody



talk about nonviolence to him. And yet he was to us the delivery system for nonviolence in Black America. Right. And hopefully in the nation. This was what we really wanted, because we figured that, that was the future and that was a chance to test out what was possible, for nonviolence in the nation, particularly in Black America. But if we could sell Black America, we could sell the nation. That was the first time I had met him. And, we ended up doing a 20 page piece on Martin and he did not know that, and we were fortunate that a photographer, a Black photographer, had already done a lot of pictures on Martin but hadn't used them. Right. And, but he let us use them, and so, this is exactly what we wanted.

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INTERVIEWER:

You said we were lucky that he became a preacher. And he didn't like the way a lot of preachers were. Could you talk a little more about that?

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C.T. VIVIAN:

Yeah. In fact, Martin was the kind of person who understood people that they dealt with, and he really understood his father, but he also understood the difference between he and his father. He also understood what it meant to be a successful minister in the South. And how difficult it was to be a true preacher in the South. Right? There was a great difference between he and his father's preaching. All right. But, everybody loved Martin as soon as they heard him. There was a desire for people to be a part of an educated South and educated ministry. But the people loved it. They loved it when he was



able to talk like he was really educated, and he was. And do it so fully and so easily. And, Martin did and how he made his points, it was always at a different level and in a different way than most other preachers did. Most others, not all, but most others. And the reason for that was, is because he had this unusual education. You know, Martin King was writing materials for the Atlanta newspaper before he was, before he was even out of this college. And he was unusual. Well, most people knew that, they didn't know how to respond to it, but when he preached, they knew how to respond to it, and, they responded in a way that said that, this is what we're waiting for, that we hope we have more ministers like Martin Luther King. And, as soon as Martin started to lead the people they — I remember, people talking about the night they picked the leader for the movement, and they stood up and we want him, you know, and, and they pointed and they pointed to him and, because he wasn't trying to, become anything. The people made him the thing. That's a very important point.

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INTERVIEWER:

Could you talk about the development of nonviolence, in Dr. King and in the movement?

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C.T. VIVIAN:

In fact, we weren't — none of us were too well educated. And, in terms of nonviolence, very few towns and cities and places had any knowledge of nonviolence. And, there wasn't any idea that everybody would know about



Martin or Martin or know about Gandhi or know about any of that. Right. That had to come later and it came as a result of Martin having a method. But had he not had a chance to prove it, there's a doubt whether many people would have caught on. Right. But, remember, they proved it there. And, they won, and so that the bus boycott that changed buses and how everybody had had to ride in Montgomery. That was the proof of the method of winning. Right. And that was so, so, so important — not a matter of talking, a matter of doing.

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INTERVIEWER:

What was your job for Doctor King? And how did he persuade you to take it?

00:11:01:00

C.T. VIVIAN:

Abernathy called me from the group and said, when we come back from the evening meal I'd like for you to preach nonviolence for us. And, I was really, you know, I wasn't going to let the idea go. I certainly was going to preach it, but I didn't expect it. Nor did I expect anything, at the level that Abernathy and Martin then, because they never said anything that they didn't agree on together. Right? I knew then that they wanted me to do more than sit around. And as a result of that, when I told everything to my wife, she understood it, as well, we understood that, here was a chance to do what we had been thinking of a long time ago, and we had been, and as a result, the people ate up the ideas, because they desired it. Everybody wanted a means and a method whereby we could beat racism at a higher level. And without and



— keep the faith. And because that was terribly important, the only thing that we had was Christianity. The only thing that white, that white, America allowed us to have was our churches. That's the only thing Black America had was its churches. And, we used it any way we desired. I mean, we were, and we did not mind, telling each other how wrong, white America's racism was right. And...but, how do you? And we won. In fact, we almost — we put the ...we had the meetings in Nashville, that put the bus company out of business. They had to give way to us, not we to them.

00:14:21:00

INTERVIEWER:

So what was that job like? Could you describe that work?

00:14:24:00

C.T. VIVIAN:

Well, the thing is, is that, how did we openly teach nonviolence to people in church settings? See, that was how it was going to go. How did we talk to ministers, in a way that they could see that nonviolence was going to be the new thing? How did we...we knew that the people liked it, but how would we transfer it? Right. And, since Martin and Abernathy particularly liked my teaching of it, and my talking about it, right. Because first you were talking about it —you were not teaching nonviolence. As a result of that, I went all over the South to remember Martin had already set things up. He had talked to about 50 ministers across the country. And, we were just following behind this man. If, if, if, if I could do it, they could do it.



00:15:49:00

INTERVIEWER:

Many people say that he was subject to bouts of depression about whether nonviolence was going to work...did you see signs of that depression and how he coped with it?

00:16:00:00

C.T. VIVIAN:

Well, you see, the only thing I saw. Right. Is that, here's a guy struggling with — how do we get to the point? That...all this time and energy was spent with nonviolence and having nonviolent struggles, and having nonviolent struggles, period. And he would want to be remembered, more for his concern over nonviolence than for any other subject. And now that's what I don't know is whether, the people when he died that they were really thinking about or when he was murdered, really, that they really wanted to think about, that here is the man of nonviolence. More so than any other, any other future, that he wanted, a future world, that was, known for, for desiring, and that the world changed because of our nonviolent struggles. You know, the closest I came to it. Is that, that, that last night. And Martin's life. When, he. When he came up, you know, they came over from the hotel, came over to give this speech and that rainy night and, but he stood up and started talking. And when he ended, he was, he was. It. It didn't surprise me. And I don't know why, but it didn't surprise me. That he died the next day. At this age, though, he knew what was coming. But he knew what he was going to do, and he knew who he was and what he looked forward to doing and wished that he was going to live longer. Now, that sounds strange, but that's because he



was concerned that he could create or be a part of creating a nonviolent world, a nonviolent nation at least, or a nonviolent people at least. Right. But it was not to be.

00:19:26:00

INTERVIEWER:

Could you talk to us a little about the last time you saw Doctor King?

00:19:30:00

C.T. VIVIAN:

It was going to rain, and I left the office and, which was, completely on the other side of town and, and, started toward the house. And we heard that Martin, all the way, over to the house...we kept hearing, Martin King was killed tonight, or he's hurting or...and they bring it out slowly to you. We started toward the airport, and we got there before the airplane had come. The next morning, and we had a car that we had rented at the airport. And, we — and Coretta and the mayor of Atlanta — were there to meet the plane and, I remember she was looking out the window...or one of the windows of the plane. And, I mean, I don't mean that she was at the window. She was looking, she had opened the window and she was looking out and so did we. So we were watching it as the — who brought the casket up to the side of the plane. And the thing that stood out for me was, as the plane was going up, Martin was in the casket. She seemed to come out of the... plane. And as he came up closer, she reached out further. And had not reached, but came out further. Right? It was as though they were going to meet each other. Every time I think about it, I know that this can't be real. That's why I'm trying to



get it right. It's that — I really thought that she was going to reach out and kiss him. Because he was coming up closer to her and she was reaching out further. Right. And, and it didn't happen, but, that's what I thought was going to happen. And then she went back into the plane and the plane took off. And, we went our various ways.

END TC: 00:23:47:00