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DOROTHY COTTON INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
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DOROTHY COTTON
Education Director, SCLC
Interviewed by Trey Ellis
May 5, 2017
Total Running Time: 22 minutes

00:00:00:00 TREY ELLIS:

We'll just talk, we'll start our conversation- can you us the first time you met Martin Luther King? How did you meet him and what were your first impressions of meeting him?

00:00:10:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

I'm not sure that this is going to be a successful interview for you because- he's just another guy as far as I'm concerned. That's exaggerated and I shouldn't say that, but when I first met him, it was at Wyatt Walker's house, I don't know if you know Wyatt Tee Walker. Wyatt was a minister in town, in Petersburg, Virginia. And, of course, you've got a visiting preacher in town, so you make a nice dinner. So, we made the nice dinner at our pastor's house, Wyatt Walker's house, and- and I helped serve the dinner, so I'm taking the- trays of food around the table for, I don't know, five, six or seven people, at Wyatt Walker's house, our local minister's house. One reason that I know that Reverend Walker wanted Martin to come to Petersburg was the fact that Reverend Walker was struggling against a system that declared that only white folks could use the public library, and I think it was only one day a week and it was on- I think it was on Wednesdays. You can research that, but I'm pretty sure that's the day.

00:01:39:00 And I don't know- but we couldn't seem to break that regulation by ourselves, that is Reverend Walker, Wyatt Tee Walker, who's still around, as a matter of fact, and- but he invited this preacher that he had met somewhere, Martin Luther King, invited him to come and do some sermons at his church, at Reverend Walker's church. So, when-

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I remember being there to help serve the dinner, so there's like six or seven people walking around the table with trays of food and I don't know who the other guests were, but there were other guests around the table helping to serve the food. And I think some kind of connection happened. And we started to- we started to have some ongoing interaction with this preacher, Martin Luther King. They became fast friends and they wanted an education director, and I had a Master's degree from education- in education from Boston University. And when I- I think I was hankering to leave Petersburg, Virginia. So, when reverend Walker asked me to come because he wanted to run those kinds of classes at his church, I was- I told my husband, I'll see you in a few days. I- I have to try not to cry 'cause I didn't ever come back.

00:03:18:00 TREY ELLIS:

And as you got to know Dr. King, did you feel that he- did he always want to be a preacher? Was he someone that- that wanted to be a preacher from a young age because of this father? And- I'm saying, is there any other job he might have done?

00:03:32:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

Yeah, Martin was a natural born preacher and, and I say that because I became very close, very much in the inner circle- at- ultimately, Martin's church, but that's kind of ahead of the story here. And, and I knew that I was impressed by what this preacher, this little preacher, as my sister would say, what he- how he could- put a sermon together if you wake him up, probably in the middle of the night, I don't know

TREY ELLIS:

Your sister called him a "little preacher" was he physically- was he-

00:04:14:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

He was no taller than I was. You could look at photographs and see that. If you haven't seen- I could probably send you pictures of Martin standing in a group and he's the shortest one there, but he was the most powerful one there too. Powerful

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speaker. And not only was he a powerful speaker, he was very- effective- as a speaker. Martin could- he could hold an audience in the palm of his hand and- making sense.

TREY ELLIS:

When- could you talk about- when he would give a speech, he's famous for his- his language, and also his big words, his intellectual speeches. How did that land with- with the audience- did you come- how did he come across?

00:05:17:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

I have never thought of Martin- of- neither Wyatt nor Martin making big speeches because he could- he could too easily hold the audience in the palm of his hand. We were just drawn to him. That's- that's what I can say about it, we were drawn to Martin Luther King because of his artistry, the way he could speak- and- you know that's it- what else is there to say besides he was great- and people responded to it.

TREY ELLIS:

Can you talk about being on the road with Martin Luther King? The kind of family- any- anecdotes- any stories about being on the road as his inner circle, traveling the world and traveling the country? Any great stories that come to mind?

00:06:11:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

Well, they had small children. And you know, Dexter and Yolanda, and- they had to- somebody had to be home with those small children. And so Coretta was home with the children. And, and Martin was the one that was spreading the gospel, she wasn't- Coretta wasn't about to try to stop her husband from doing what he obviously felt born to do. And- I don't know anything, I never heard anything about his- her trying to stop him from doing what he was just natural at and that is speaking, sermonizing, he was a poet. You could wake Martin up and- from a nap and he could do a sermon.

00:07:02:00 TREY ELLIS:

On the road, I mean, when you're traveling through another town, what- as a man,

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what would he eat- what would you eat? Any kind of moments you- any moments of that life that you remember fondly about traveling with Dr. King- anything that really sticks out that you remember in your life.

00:07:23:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

See, I know- people think someone who achieves that degree of fame- I think maybe I did that too for a while, we think of such a person as being extraordinary- and he could- the other- the rest of you could close your ears- in your neighborhood, did they ever serve pig feet? You could see Martin eating one. There's a picture somewhere, but it probably got thrown away. But he loved the- he loved the pork trays and- which I thought sometimes were disgusting, I could eat a little bit of it, but, but he loved to- just be down home with the folks- that's my sister's language. And- but it was always- I'll give you an example of what I'm thinking about the naturalness of this guy, Martin.

00:08:27:00 We would walk from the SCLC office down the street, from our office and we would pass the juke joints- is that a language you could- guys in there playing pool, probably got no jobs and, and Martin would go in there and play with them. And I remember saying to him, "You are due at the church in twenty minutes, I mean, like his mother." And- and I'd say, "We got to get there." When Martin would get there, from the pool hall to the church, he just- he was good at it too- when he would get to the church, he would take five or ten minutes and go in the back and sit for a few minutes. And when he'd come out- came- would come out, he was on fire with the gospel. He was a natural preacher, Martin was a natural preacher. And, and he didn't mind stopping on the street where the pool shops were- I don't know if you all call them pool shops, but he didn't mind stopping, hanging out with those people in that neighborhood, you know what I mean?

TREY ELLIS:
Yeah, of course.

00:09:46:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

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Why, why would he not stop with them? He never gave up his humanity, his naturalness and so- and he would like to see if he could be some of those guys. And one of us would have to get Martin away from the pool table to... "You're due at the church in ten minutes," you know? And when he got to the church, you would think he'd been studying all night.

TREY ELLIS:

Can you talk about Stokely Carmichael and his relationship with Martin Luther King?

00:10:19:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

I can't talk about Stokely Carmichael because there was no such thing as a relationship- there was such a thing as- I'm trying to think of the right word- I think you can count on one hand the time they were in the same space together. Same thing with two or three other of the guys who were of that ilk. And- 'cause they were going to have nothing to do with nonviolence. And Martin would laugh and play with them and- but that was also Martin's way of getting to know them and he could kind of sneak up on them. And for example, one guy was going to go beat up a white guy, an African American guy was going to beat- and he said, "Let's see, yesterday, you told me- what kind of community is it you say you want? Oh, and you going get it by beating up the blonde guy?" And it was over. I mean he, he had that kind of humor.

00:11:22:00 But- because people were learning. People were learning and they needed to learn. They needed- and I was- I had fifty people sometimes in a workshop discussing nonviolence. And we would of- very often, I'd get Martin to come over and close out a five-day training workshop with the focus on nonviolence. And I'll never forget- as a matter of fact, have you seen the book I did "If Your Back's Not Bent?" That's what Martin said as he finished talking to these fifty or sixty people, "If your back's not bent- nobody can ride your back if your back's not bent." When he said that, I mean, I made a big speech out of that- what does he mean by back being bent?

TREY ELLIS:

Can you talk about how nonviolence is misunderstood today?

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00:12:22:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

I don't think it's misunderstood, I don't think anybody is teaching it. And nobody's- who's teaching it? And to teach nonviolence, we need to go into some depth and talk about what Mahatma Gandhi did in India. We need to talk about what- anybody we can find in this country, we can talk about Martin- we can talk about what they did and how that brought about a more peaceful community rather than go beat up some white guy because he believed in segregation.

00:12:56:00 TREY ELLIS:

I was going to ask about what it was like to be- about women in the movement. What was it like to be a woman in a movement run by men? And- you know in terms of feminism; did you think that- how was Martin- what was Martin's attitude?

00:13:13:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

Yeah. I- don't even deal with that junk. Now, when I say "that junk," it was up in the Delta of Mississippi that Fannie Lou Hamer was up there fighting for the right of black folk to go into public places, use a public restroom, all those- Fannie Lou Hamer. It was Rosa Parks who decided she was not going to move to the back of the bus- I don't let people get away with saying anything like that because it's not true. When Rosa Parks would not move to the back of the bus to give a white guy her seat up front, it didn't have anything to do with black, white, it had to do with this woman who said, "I am not going to the back of that bus."

00:13:57:00 TREY ELLIS:

Can- going back to Martin- when he's having a meeting of all of his staff, his inner circle, Andy Young, Jesse Jackson, all the people around- all the inner and outer circles- what was his leadership style- what was Martin Luther King's leadership style?

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00:14:13:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

I chuckle because people were so- I want to use the word autonomous, but I don't believe- I don't believe anybody would say that it was a team of individualists, 'cause we were a team. We were a team and, and when Martin spoke, we shut up and listened. There was something about the way Martin- Martin could sit there for a half an hour, an hour, listening to us argue about, "No, let's go here, let's go there, let's teach this, let's do..." whatever. And he would, he would listen to us argue and debate something and when it was time to act, I remember seeing Martin just stand up and go. And guess what we did, we went right behind him because there was something about the way he said and did what he did. Yeah. We knew we had the right man, the right leader with the right spirit. What Martin had didn't- was not given and taken like a match or something- Martin could be very quiet and have all the power in the room.

00:15:52:00 TREY ELLIS:

I wanted to talk about Vietnam and the Riverside Church Speech and his- how- that must have been difficult for Martin to come out against the Vietnam War. Were you part of those discussions?

00:16:04:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

I- I'm not going to be an expert on that, but I know- what I do know is that- Martin- killing each other is not going to solve the problem. And so maybe I do know that. Martin could talk about- he could describe what's going to happen once you kill- and he could talk about family members and what have you created. He would- he could teach a lot by asking questions. And when he would ask the questions, a sudden quiet would come over the room, and- because he wanted to make people think about what they wanted. And if you want- "What was it? In the earlier- this morning session- what was it you said you wanted? Yeah, so- if you go kill her son, what you think they going to do to your son?" So, there's not much to talk about there- it's about re-changing the way we interpret violence versus nonviolence. And, and I think we don't see it that way, we don't look at how do we change the way people think about things and killing.

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00:17:26:00 We need people- somebody out there teaching right now. “What, what you going do, so if you kill that woman’s son, what do you think’s gonna happen to your son?” If you- that’s a flippant way of putting it, I mean, I wouldn’t be so- I would probably introduce it with some poetry and always some singing [*singing*] *I’m gonna do what the spirit says do, I’m gonna do what the spirit says do, what the spirit says do, I’m gonna do it Lord, do what the spirit says do.* [*Talking*] And then we go on and say- you name things that you’re going do. I don’t know- Martin loved to sing too. You know, the civil rights movement was a singing movement, you know? And we loved to- we always sang. And Martin would get out in the middle of the floor and lead an auditorium full of song. He loved to sing. And his sister Christine was a trained singer. But Martin didn’t have to be trained, he sang from his heart.

TREY ELLIS:

What did you sing with him? What did you like to sing with Martin?

00:18:36:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

It wasn’t about singing with Martin, it was about getting the church to sing- getting a room full of people where he’s getting ready to speak, and he often would get up to sing- he would often get me to get that room singing before he even came out there. But when he came out there, he’d get them to sing one of his favorite songs, or get me to sing a song, but he loved to sing.

TREY ELLIS:

What kind of song- would you like to sing for us? What did you sing? What songs when you think of Martin do you...?

00:19:11:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

Well, as I was just humming there- [*Singing*] *I’m gonna do what the spirit says do, I’m gonna do what the spirit says do, what the spirit says do, I’m gonna do, oh Lord, do what the spirit says do.* [*Talking*] we used to sing [*singing*] *I’ll go to jail if the*

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spirit says jail, I'll go to jail if the spirit says jail, if the spirit says jail, I'll go to jail, oh lord, I'll go to jail if the spirit says ja- [talking] We sang a lot of different kinds of songs.

TREY ELLIS:

Could I ask you, what do you think that Dr. King would be doing if he hadn't been killed. What would he- where would he have gone with the movement and his work?

00:20:13:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

He would have looked at, I believe, people who are down and out. He would be looking at- there's a book, it's called "The New Jim Crow." You seen that? And I haven't read it all yet, but he would be looking at that and why, why do we still have poor people who don't have enough to eat and can't send their kids to school and things like that. He would- he would be on the nonviolent battlefield. And I really think he would, because I think it was just in his blood that he would do it. He'd be speaking- getting some of us to do training workshops. And we'd be sitting around the table laying out things that we were going to now work on. I think he would keep on going.

00:21:08:00 TREY ELLIS:

In terms of your work, in terms of the younger generation today, what would you say to people today- where's the fight today? What should we be doing?

00:21:17:00 DOROTHY COTTON:

Now, I would never say it like that- I wouldn't say it was a fight, I would say- I would use a different concept, because I would want community where there was a lot of suffering, I would want them to look at what's not working right. And let them- the people in that area look- what is the need here? And- that's what we did in the civil rights movement- Fannie Lou Hamer up in the Delta of Mississippi, Rosa Parks on that bus in Alabama. What is the need now? And I wouldn't lay it out, but I'd have a pocket full of answers, maybe. And, and I think- that's what I think we need to do. It's

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where do we go from here? And we do need to go somewhere. We have some work to do. We probably always will.

00:22:17:00 END OF INTERVIEW