

*Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2016*

Interviewees: Maria Varela

Interview Date: June 29, 2016

Location: Pasadena, California

Interviewer: David Cline

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: 1 file; approximately 1 hour, 43 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Female 1: From the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Crew: OK, this is room tone, about thirty seconds. Mostly to get rid of the air conditioner. OK, end the room tone.

DAVID CLINE: OK. Today it's June the 29th, 2016. This is David Cline for the Civil Rights History Project of the Library of Congress, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. I'm with the history department at Virginia Tech. Behind the camera today, we have John Bishop with Media Generation and UCLA. And Guha Shankar from the Library of Congress. We're in Pasadena, California today. And very, very pleased to have Maria Varela, who came out here all the way from New Mexico to join us. And this is the one time I'll coach you at all in our conversation. But if you could introduce yourself in a full sentence, so we can use that later. My name is, and where and when you were born.

MARIA VARELA: OK. My name is Maria Varela. I was born January 1st, in the middle of a blizzard, 1940, in a little town in Pennsylvania called Newell, Pennsylvania.

DC: And can we start with your childhood, or even before that, with your family background? Like to get a sense of sort of what shaped you as you then developed your life as an activist?

MV: Well certainly, the family was not political. And probably leaned a little to the conservative side. Although were socially open around issues of injustice. I had a mother who was scrupulously fair, which is why I think all of my four other sisters, we all get along pretty well, because there was never any favoritism. So we learned about fairness, sort of at the breast in a way. And a dad, who himself, once they came to this country, during the revolution, experienced his share of racism and ridicule. In fact, they would joke about it, because he came from six brothers and one sister, and he and his two older brothers played football.

DC: And where had he been born?

MV: Well he had been born in Mazapil, in Zacatecas, Mexico. And they came over, I think when he was nine. And they thought they would stay around the San Antonio area for a while and then go back. But this revolution kind of dragged out further, and so they decided, there was such anti-immigrant sentiment. I mean, we think it's bad today, it was really bad then. This was probably close to 1920, and if you remember in the early '20s they were passing like the Chinese Exclusion Act, there was all of this stuff. If an American from this--a United States citizen married somebody from Mexico, they would lose their citizenship. It was pretty stiff, to say it kindly. I

think then Grandpa decided that they were going to go where there were not a lot of Mexicanos. And he had gone to school for mining, up in--at Columbia University. And, which had a cooperative relationship to the Colorado School of Mines. So that's how he learned his mining. So he decided that they would go that direction. And that's where Dad met my mother, in high school. So, he would always say that he and his brothers who made it on scholarship, football scholarship, made it because of the epitaphs that people would throw at them, like, "Go home, greaser," and it just made them play all the harder, and they won. [Laughter] They won a lot. So they all got scholarships, football scholarships. He was an athlete. He played--I don't know, it wouldn't be called--kind of like farm team ball for a while, and got invited to become what was, whatever then was like full-time baseball player. Well, but turned it down. So, the poor man had five girls who were not particularly athletic. Tried to. Tried his best. He did, however, take me out of school to go hunting with him, since I was the oldest daughter, and there was no older son, oldest daughter had to stand in lieu, and so we did several hunting trips from about the time I was eleven on. Bought me my own shotgun, which I ended up then taking south at a certain point when I joined the movement.

DC: So you grew up with that? Came in handy?

MV: Yeah.

DC: So can you tell me a little bit about your early schooling? [5:00] And what that was like?

MV: We went to Catholic schools. The Catholic high school that I went to was called Terminal Education. [Laughter] Not that we were going to die when we graduated, but it was like, we were trained--actually I got some very good training in

shorthand and typing. I had really good skills that way. Because most of the women, young women in that school, were--didn't come from families who either envisioned or could pay for them to go to college. That was a different high school, and Dad couldn't really afford to put all of us into the more expensive high school that was more on a college track. And so, we were on the kind of a secretary until you find a good husband track.

MV: So, I think Dad didn't really envision us going to college. He felt what women do is get married and have children, and college is a waste.

DC: And he had been to college.

MV: He had been to college. But for women? You know, that was not like the norm. And what happened, I think, was--and this is by the time we had moved, we had moved several times, by this time we were in Chicago. And they have really good friends, and the father in this family dropped dead one day. He was like, forty-five years old. Just dropped dead. Leaving the widow with five children. And looking at how was she going to support this family? Because she didn't have a whole lot of marketable skills. And I think that changed my dad's mind, was that if something-- I think it was some kind of a watershed in his thinking about what would happen to us. So, I was firstborn and we were trundled off--I mean he took me around to look at different colleges, and fortunately for me, I settled on a Franciscan school called Alverno, in Milwaukee. Which really was specifically designed for young women who either had one or two parents that had not had a college education. They were definitely about taking blue collar kids from blue collar families, and providing a college education. It wasn't like the other snooty schools that we went to. I was, I felt really uncomfortable in

these other sort of more like finishing schools. And this one was less so. Just because of the student body.

DC: Can I ask you, in terms of growing up in your family, did you--was it an English-only speaking household?

MV: Yes.

DC: Or did you speak Spanish at all?

MV: No, because my grandfather was very strict about not wanting the boys to speak Spanish at home. He'd get physical with them if they did. I think part of that was, I don't think he was happy with the accent that he had. I'm just guessing. You know? Because, or I think he also didn't understand that you could perfectly manage two languages and be excellent in both. But I think he wanted them to be excellent in English. So he was very strong about that.

DC: And on your mother's side, what's her heritage?

MV: She was Irish, basically Irish and German. Her father raised money for the IRA, which has probably warped some of the DNA that came through, you know?

DC: [Laughter] Come here from various places, right.

MV: Yes.

DC: OK. So the Franciscan college that--.

MV: Yeah.

DC: --you ended up, yeah, yeah.

MV: Yeah, it was a good--yeah. And I think what was very formative, and it's difficult to explain this, but there was an era in the Catholic Church when there was the sense that social engagement was the core of the religion, and not the sort of collateral,

well if you want to throw some money at the poor, do that. And this was--so there was a movement called the social inquiry movement, and it was within families, called the Christian family movement, it was in working people, it came out of the Belgian worker priest movement. This whole thing is Second World War. Which was basically, sort of upending the kind of church pyramid where saying that laypeople were charged, and if the clergy didn't want to go along, well too bad. Because we need to be out there. Because conditions for workers were horrible, as during the turn, at the turn of the century. And of course, there was an encyclical that kind of gave the charge, which is Leo the Thirteenth, which said society has to be restructured for justice. The man didn't know what he was kind of engaged in. And [10:00]a lot of that, the whole resistance movement in France, and Belgium, and Germany, that involved Catholics working side by side with Jewish people, and with atheists, and with everything, really upended things in the Church. And so, one of the products of all of that was this sort of, you know what? You can't just tell people that they have to be engaged, you have to train people. It was a fantastic training where you were, the social inquiry was, you tried to figure out what the problem was, and you did that by going out and asking the people affected by the problem. It wasn't go research it out of some book, and have some academic tell you what the problem is. Go find it out, you know?

DC: How revolutionary, yeah, yeah.

MV: Yeah, at that time.

DC: Yeah, actually talk to people.

MV: Because we're looking at the '50s, '40s and '50s doing this. And then, you were supposed to come back and say OK, so let's think, let's reflect, what should

this, how could this be remedied? What should this community look like, so that this wouldn't happen anymore. And then we'd say well yeah, but do we know enough? So then you'd go back out. It was like peeling an onion. After about four or five, we'd have weekly meetings, you kind of begin to get to the core, and it was like oh wow, what an-- especially if you're in a Catholic college. 'Cause you're supposed to look at your milieu, and what are barriers there to people loving each other, or to people not feeling ostracized or bullied. Or to the nuns getting it wrong, which those were always fun things to do. They didn't like that. But--.

DC: Was there any influence from community--I'm thinking of Saul Alinsky, who worked with the Catholic churches.

MV: This is before.

DC: Even before?

MV: This, Saul was working in the '50s, right?

DC: Yeah, yeah.

MV: He didn't design this, this came out of France and Belgium. In fact, he could have been influenced by it.

DC: So he could have been, interesting.

MV: Yeah. But--.

DC: OK. So we're talking about the--.

MV: Young Christian Students.

DC: Yeah, the Young Christian Student organization.

MV: Yeah. I was involved in that in high school, because your choices, you were expected to belong to some group, so there was Sodality, which prayed the rosary a

lot, which I just loathed. [Laughter] There was the Young Christian Students, which was, just seemed like more fun. And in the process of being more fun, you learned this, and you never could leave a meeting without some kind of action, even if it was go get some more information. So kind of was the opposite of what's often in young people's movements. That especially start in educational circles, where there's a lot of theory and a lot of analyzing, but not a whole lot of action. Well this didn't let you do that. Which is why it was a brilliant method, I am trying to get to the bottom of it, I've been doing so much research and since I'm limited in not being able to read French, which is where you see some of the roots of this, I'm just intrigued about how this came about. In any case, when I went to college, I discovered being a homesick freshman, that they had a Young Christian Students there. I thought oh, I'm going to join, I know all about this. So, I joined, and was in it for four years. And the nice thing about the Young Christian Students was that their whole thrust was you've got to get out of the Catholic ghetto. You've got to just not have this be a part of the national Catholic students organization. You have to really get involved with the National Student Association, NSA. Because that's students from across the country, that's where we belong. You know, and of course the nuns thought that maybe the NSA was little Communist, because don't forget, this is like the McCarthy era, a little after the McCarthy era.

DC: So what are the years that you're in school?

MV: So the years I am in college were [19]50--I think I graduated high school in [19]57, [19]57 to [19]61, is that about right?

DC: Yeah.

MV: Yeah. So McCarthy era was like, in those mid-'50s. I remember watching the hearings on television, I was like wow. But in any case, because of the involvement with YCS, I was able to kind of get a window on other students who were not Catholic. And what their interests were. And I became student body president, and decided that--I petitioned that I could go to the National Student Association Congress. Actually I also went my junior year. And the way I did it was I used my high school typing and steno training to work in the secretariat, which meant that my room and board was paid cause the nuns weren't going to pay for it. But I could go, you know? So, in that process is where I heard SNCC folks. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee sit-in participants and leaders who came because they wanted the NSA to go on record to support the sit-ins. It was a huge struggle, because of the bloc of Southern schools [15:00] in the NSA that wanted nothing to do with that. And the, I was blown away how articulate these folks that were like, my age, and how they could just, every article, every argument that could, that came up, they were so, and they were very nice about it. I mean, they were really not hostile, I don't know the word to use. But, could--were able to defeat the arguments, but in a way that wasn't battering your enemy down into the trenches. And so that was my first window to that. And then--.

DC: Do you remember any particular personalities at that time?

MV: Chuck McDew was there. Tim Jenkins was there a lot. He had some relationship to NSA. He was very articulate. As was Chuck. And John Lewis may have come, I'm really not sure about that. But, I had been to two before I graduated. Also met, I don't know if I met Tom Hayden by then. I did. I met Tom Hayden at the Nationals, because he was trying to do this liberal caucus that evolved into eventually

SDS. Because I remember, I don't know how the interesting thing about this age is that it's really, it's community organizing, it's really all relationships. And it's sometimes even mysterious how they happen. Because here am I, from this little Podunk school in Milwaukee Wisconsin, you know, with absolutely no background, never read C. Wright Mills, never read Marx, didn't have a clue what they were talking about. You know, but somehow through relationships, I ended up attending their caucus.

DC: Did you meet Connie Curry at that time, too?

MV: Later.

DC: Oh later, OK. Because--.

MV: I don't remember specifically, but I could have.

DC: OK.

MV: I did a lot of work in the secretary--maybe this is what it was, I worked in the secretariat, which meant if that liberal caucus wanted to bring some kind of resolution through, that they wanted the body to pass, well come through me or others, there were three of us that were--three or four of us.

DC: So you knew everything that was going on, yeah.

MV: Well they'd come and ask me, yeah. I got my feet wet in a world that I really didn't understand very much. But I liked the people very much. I liked their values, I liked the way they would stand up for things. So that's kind of how it gets started, you know?

DC: So then, when did you have a more formal relationship with SNCC?

MV: What I remember is that Tom got a hold of me and said--oh, then what happened, in my senior year, I got an offer from the Young Christian Students national

staff, would I join them? And help organize, be a staff member. Because we had various functions that we did. Among them, doing organizing on both Catholic campuses, and public school campuses that had Newman centers. Because some of them had the Young Christian Students in there. And I'm going to move my blouse, is it OK? [laughter] I did have--one of my advisors had gotten me a fellowship at Market in speech therapy.

'Cause she suggested to me that that's what I should do. I had no clue what that was about, and I thought well, I guess I've got to do something with my college education. Speech was my major. Although I did act, I was also an actor. But, I kind of just said OK, so she had me apply for it. And I got accepted, and then this offer came from the Young Christian Students, and she said to me, you can postpone it for a year. So that's what happened. I accepted the offer for the Young Christian Students, went to Chicago, where their headquarters were. Lived in rat-infested apartments on the West Side because there was no money. We got \$7 a week room and board. I mean we truly lived like Catholic worker, you know, kind of communities. But were much more activist in some ways. I shouldn't say that, because I don't really know a lot--Catholic worker communities are different from place to place. So, as I was on the national staff for the Young Christian Students, Tom Hayden got a hold of me and said, "We're going to do this Port Huron conference to put together a manifesto." I didn't know what that meant. And we're trying to be, he didn't use the word, but he meant ecumenical about it. Because they were trying to get out of their ghetto, their sort of leftist ghetto. [20:00]

'Cause, and the other interesting thing about this era is that student organizations were almost always attached to adult organizations. Students weren't thought of as competent enough, or that age group, to do their own thing. Which is why SNCC was such an

incredible accomplishment, because the NAACP and the SCLC wanted to appendage them, and the students said no. And it's like Diane Nash said, we brought the town of Nashville to their knees, why do we need adult overseers, you know? And I think the SDS then sort of took note. Because they were involved in the different alphabets on the left. They were red diaper babies, essentially. Which meant that they were just raised up in this kind of left enclave, often from Eastern European sort of families. And--.

DC: But there was, some of them had a faith-based activist background as well, and that's definitely true of Tom.

MV: That's what I found out when we went to Port Huron.

DC: OK, I don't want to jump ahead. [Laughter]

MV: Yeah, no exactly right. I only remember that because Tom asked me to meet him in New York, I was back east, and he said, "Me and Al Haber want to talk to you, can you come?" And we met at someplace in New York, I think it was the oyster bar or something. And he said, "This is what we want to do. And we'd like to invite YCS to be a part of this." And I thought, "Wow, that's pretty amazing." Well, earlier that day, he and Al had taken me to their little office, they were part of an organization under SLID, Student Labor something, something. And you--there was, I was in this building, I think it was the Lower East Side, and you had these little cubby holes with glass doors, and there were all these names of like, old left [laughter] somebody, Albanians for whatever. You know? Kind of, and it's like God, I thought, this is a whole different world, you know? I knew nothing about this world. But anyway, I said I'll take it back to the team and see what they say. And then, I did go to Port Huron. And there, I met Casey Hayden. And I met other SNCC folks. Including Tim Jenkins. Got to spend

more time then with them than at an NSA meeting. Spent a week in Port Huron, just about. And so that was it. I helped Casey, I actually have the original minutes of the student, of the Port Huron conference that I typed on. I just found those. Then about three months later, I get this letter from Casey saying, we really need help here in the office. I guess things were just blowing up. This is 1960, the end of [19]62. You know, they had basically all this campus presence, there were all these sit-ins happening, there were all these affiliations that groups were--there were people, I think, in that era, they were making the decision to field full-time field workers. People would leave school, as Julian said, just for five years; we're going to do this. [Laughter] We'll get this job done in five years. And that created a lot of work at the office. And Casey remembered my great St. Louis Academy skills, and said would I come down and work?

DC: Now had you been involved in the Port Huron statement at all?

MV: Yeah.

DC: Yeah. Yeah.

MV: The recollection is not real clear. I did write a whole essay on, you know, some of the things that went on. There was just some semantical issues that Tom says I solved for them. And I don't know if I did or not.

DC: Because again, I always felt that there's, so the language about authenticity in that is very much a student Christian movement kind of influence.

MV: Yeah, well Casey came out of the Young Christian Women's Organization. There were, this is back to your point. There were faith-based people who got involved because it wasn't just the Catholic, that sector of the Catholic Church that wanted engagement. You found that in Presbyterians, Episcopalians, certainly the Jewish

faith, that was very much a part of it. The engagement, and that was a strong presence there at Port Huron. But yeah.

DC: So anyway, back to the--going down to the office.

MV: So that was part of the language, yeah.

DC: Yeah, yeah.

MV: I didn't want to go and just procrastinated, and I'm like, I'm not going down there, they kill people.

DC: And this is in Atlanta? They had--.

MV: Well she wanted me to go to the Atlanta office. You know, and I finally [25:00] just decided well, you're pretty hypocritical if you're up here on these campuses exhorting these Catholic students to get engaged, and support the civil rights movement, and they ask you to go down, and you're going to tell them no? But it did take me probably three or four months to make up my mind. So, I did, and in the process, because NSA and Connie Curry and SNCC were running a summer school for these young kids that would just do these actions in these Southern towns where there wasn't a huge movement presence, and they were just getting thrown in jail, they were just getting beaten. So, it was, I think, Connie's idea, let's bring them in for training. Let's train them in nonviolent strategies, black history, other kinds of topics. It was I think a six week school. And I've been trying to track down the curriculum there. You know, because I remember it. Bob Coles was there, the psychologist. His was a real important role. He was truly an astounding man. Is, I guess. But that's where I first learned about Afro American history. It blew me--it just exploded in my head. It was--you see, in this era, do you remember the eulogy for Muhammad Ali? Where, was it Billy Crystal that

said when lightning would strike--that Muhammad was like when lightning strikes, how it illuminates everything around you? And it's this big charge? That's the way our sort of epiphanies were, and our, as we, it's hard to explain, because I realize that I was only there almost five years. But it was like I was there for a lifetime. Because of all that I learned. And the learning curve was way shortened, just because it was such an intense moment when lightning was striking all the time, and illuminating things that people had told you it was this way, and you find out oh no, it was this way. And it's like, what the heck? You know, why have these elders lied to us all these years? You know, which really fed into this movement's strength to stand when everybody else said we were wrong. Because we could really-- So my--one of my first epiphanies after going south was black history. You know, and how none of that was in my curriculum, or education. And it's like, but I watched the impact on these young black kids, especially young black men. They were holding themselves differently, it was like wow, you know? We're not trash. Look at the achievements, look at our ancestors. They made a huge difference in the way then they began paying attention to everything else that was coming their way in this summer school. And I just, it was a big lesson burned into my brain.

I was sitting in the cafeteria one day, and Frank Smith, who was a SNCC full-time staff worker, I can't remember where Frank was from, because I watched Frank drive into the campus, and he had this old beat up Ford station wagon, and there was like a bunch of straw in it. And I was like God, that guy drove through hay fields to get here. And he wore this battered old cowboy hat. And he--we sat down and had lunch together. So he asked me about me. And where I came from. And I told him, I came out of--I told him about Young Christian Students. And he had this funny look on his face. I thought

oh, what's that about? So, it was either that day or the next day, Bernard Lafayette had come in, who also had worked in Selma, but broke his leg and had to get out of there. Because they beat him terribly. So Bernard and Frank had lunch with me and said, what would you think about going to Selma? [Laughter] I was like, going are these guys nuts? It's like I just kind of looked, in my sort of deer in the headlight expression, and they said, and this is why. And they explained that there is this French Canadian, Father Maurice Ouellet, Ouellet is the way you would say it, and he's the pastor of St. Elizabeth's, which was an Afro American Catholic Church, of which there were very few across the South. But Selma had a long tradition, the Edmundites, which is an order, had had a hospital there. See, they were kind of, it was interesting because they created jobs for black people in the hospitals, in their whole fundraising apparatus, just employed nothing but people from the black community. It was both creating sort of industry[30:00] and he had a school, they had a Catholic school.

Anyway, he was a very strong supporter of the movement, and could be, because he didn't work for any white people, he did have a bishop that was not a supporter of the movement at all, but he was in Montgomery. And Father really wanted to have some literacy training, he felt, because then people could take that twenty-one question voter registration test. It's a ridiculous test. And quite honestly, there really wasn't any hope for, even if you could read, they would--they had the option to ask you these crazy questions at the end, and they could say no, you're wrong, sorry, and then you just failed the test. But in any case, I think our thinking was, we could do a class action lawsuit of some sort, if there were just enough people who were readers. So he asked me what I do. I knew nothing about adult literacy. How do adults learn to read? You know, whatever.

And, but that's what they wanted me to do. They said here's the deal. We need you to go to Selma to support this man, because he's very important to the Selma movement, and because you're Catholic and you can support him, that'll keep him strong. And then do whatever he wants you to do, you know? So, and also, I think Worth Long was on the SNCC staff, and Worth wanted a literacy--there was a lot of this thinking through SNCC at this point in [19]63 about literacy training, and we had to learn a whole lot about that. So yeah, I said I guess I'll go. Especially what happened was, they said well just take a trip out there and meet him. And I really liked him immediately. He was just such a neat person. Had come out of his own. French Canadians weren't always well regarded. And he had that kind of family DNA, I suppose you say. So he really, he was very strong, but not in like a really paternalistic way at all. It was just, wasn't that way. I ended up in Selma. [Laughter]

DC: Can I ask you about your own self-identity at that time, in terms of your heritage and your ethnic background, and sort of what you were thinking about your own background? I was imagining you being immersed in African American history, and wondering if that sort of put off some sparks of inquiry for yourself, or?

MV: Yeah, it's hard to say, because we didn't grow up, we moved so much, we didn't grow up in a Mexican community. And of course, there wasn't Spanish spoken in our house. My dad was very proud of his heritage, and as oldest daughter that was a heritage that I myself sort of internalized, and felt strongly about. But didn't have any--I had mentioned it a couple times when I was growing up in school, and got really slapped down by one nun in particular who said, "We're all American here." Because I said to my seatmate, "I'm Mexican." And she heard me. [Laughter] And she comes walking

down the aisle. She scared the crap out of me. That's something I didn't forget for a long time. Little PTSD there. And she just was like, "No! We are all American here." You know, and like, oh God, what's wrong with being Mexican? Oh I guess there's something wrong with being Mexican. It's like, I'm starting to internalize this, and like, well I don't really care what you think, but this is what I am, but I'm not going to say anything. I never said anything. You just learn that lesson. You know? So yes. Learning black history then, you're beginning to think oh, what else don't I know? I wasn't there yet. But that certainly did end up sparking that a couple years later.

DC: OK, yeah. All right, so Selma.

MV: Well Selma was--the pressure in Selma was, I really realized I knew nothing about how adults learn. What Father said was, "Here's a lady, Ms. Caffé, she really wants to learn to read. Well, let me tell her that you'll come and teach her a couple times a week." And she wanted to learn to read the Bible. The difficulty was, as we would start, she already knew that. But I couldn't tell if it's because she had memorized the Bible, or she actually could read it. And I was beginning to watch, and because we learned this in YCS. You watch, you know? It's observe, judge, and act. Observe, reflect, and act. I'm watching, and I'm thinking she knows some of these words, and big words. And she knows what they mean. But she doesn't think she can read. And she doesn't think she can write, either. But she can do some. I began to kind of just through [35:00] my own observations, realize that, and she's just one person, so what did I know? But maybe adults who were nonreaders already had some basic reading skills, but not basic in the sequential, start with the little words and then go to the bigger words, and the bigger words after that. They actually had a variety of vocabulary, and it depended on

what they wanted to know. Or what they got exposed to, you know? That helped them pick up and remember what that word was in context. It was really perplexing. I'm going through a lot of my papers now, and I'm like, trying to figure this out. I did learn from some of my SDS buddies that foundations were very interested in having their literacy programming developed within the civil rights movement, towards voter education, and voter registration. So, Rennie Davis, who was an SDS leader, wrote me my first proposal. You know, which got funded. Then I had to do something with the money. But, part of it was to learn, and I'm piecing this together now, I will tell you that there's a lot of--it's like Swiss cheese in my mind right now, how did I get from here to there? 'Cause I've got my proposals. And they do exhibit a kind of an intuitive but almost experiential understanding of what you had to do with adult literacy, but I don't know how I got there. I'm trying--again, it's like one of those things where you have encounters, and people who really influence you, you just then forget how that came about.

To make a long story short, I decided OK, I'm going to recruit four to six Afro American students to come work in Selma for the summer of [19]64, and to, so that we can try out the development of literacy materials that can be used across the SNCC programs. Across Mississippi, Louisiana, wherever SNCC was working. And I got the money for it, and then Ruby Doris Robinson in the Atlanta SNCC office said to me, oh, Bob Moses is planning this summer program in Mississippi. [Laughter] I said, really? She said yeah. Let's see. What's wrong with this picture? She didn't say this, but this is what she meant. You're bringing in four to six black kids to Selma, and he's bringing

1,000 white kids. It's like, to Mississippi. There were some--we had some real issues about that program. In any case--.

DC: Do you remember what some of your thoughts were about that?

MV: Oh yeah, I got--it was a horrible idea. I knew what I had to go through to just get four students trained so they wouldn't get themselves killed. And these are black students. You know. And to figure out how they could be effective, because students are very oriented towards class deadlines, and homework deadlines, and their time is constrained, and then you bring them into Selma and say OK, let's work. And they had a--I did not realize, I should have had a more structured situation. But some rose above, like cream, and they did--they started to do some really good stuff. We were trying to figure out how to reach that nonreader, to bring him into classes so we could try some of these ideas that we had. One idea being like the experience story, which is, you know, tell us an experience, we'll put it up on the board, and then you fill in, you speak to this, anyway. Well then, Lyndon signed the public--the Civil Rights Act of 1964. On July 3rd or 4th, do you remember? I can't remember. July 3rd probably, because the next day, my students go down to the Thirsty Boy, or whatever it's called, to get served. Figuring out well, it's the law of the land, isn't it? It's like, but this is Selma. So five minutes later, here's Jim Clark with his cattle prod, and they were trundled off to jail. That went out--there went our summer. So, I spent the next four weeks raising bail, and getting them out, and dodging Clark, because there was a warrant out for my arrest. And then we were--and the reason for the warrant was because Selma city council had passed a regulation that there could be no meetings of two or more people without a permit, and

especially forbidden, and then they listed, SNCC, NAACP, SCL; they listed the groups that just weren't going to get a permit anyway. So, because we had--anyway. [40:00]

DC: And the church didn't give any--there wasn't any protection that the church sort of threw over you that way?

MV: No, he--Father was like, why did they do that? This is Selma. You know? But these kids, except for Silas Norman, who was from Augusta, Georgia, they were from the North. You know? And--.

DC: And were you aware of what was going on in Mississippi? Were you getting the news, and--.

MV: Not a lot.

DC: --no, no.

MV: No. Because we were so focused on getting this program done in Selma. When I think about it, Selma was probably the stupidest place to do a program where you're trying to learn how to--there's just too much--I mean it was like a Nazi state, you know? It was--Mississippi was bad too, but you had little places in Mississippi where you could take refuge and not be ratted out or stuff like that. Selma was really horrible. In the process of learning what I was doing in Selma, I did have some SNCC organizers in Mississippi when I went to staff meeting in the fall say well, we're trying to do this, and we need some booklets. By that time I had evolved to the idea, OK look, literacy is--should be much more around what do people want to learn about? Rather than here's cat, C-A-T, you know what I mean? What do they want to learn about? Because they will learn to read, or they will upgrade their reading skills, if they get something they want to read, for whatever reason. I don't know how this idea came, but there was this group of

Afro American farmers in Batesville, Panola County, Mississippi, and they did an okra co-op, they had an equipment before that, then they decided to do an okra co-op. And the idea evolved, and I know there's probably a lot of people who played a role in this, it isn't just my idea. And it was, let's do a booklet, or two, and a film strip. So other farmers in other places can learn. Because there were no materials that showed black people in leadership positions accomplishing things, to better the community. And that was the sense, this is where the convergence of adult readers being able to upgrade their skills, but also people learning how to do something, could come together in these books. And so we did these kinds of books. And they had photographs of black people doing things. And making change. And I had no idea about the response.

I was--and I only found this out like about two months ago, I'm going through my files, and just like, we need 1,000 of these books over here. People just asking for them all over. And then one woman wrote and said, "I can't tell you how proud I am to know that my own people have done something like that." That makes such a change, you know? It created a lot of pride. Plus, one SNCC organizer said to me, if you bring these books over here, do not please pass them out in the beginning of the meeting, because I can never get people to pay attention to the meeting. Because they're all into the books. You know? There were two of them. Going through the different phases that the co-op did to organize. So that's the whole practical way of taking what is needed in terms of social justice, and giving, having people give themselves, give their own folks, the information on how to make changes, was a big, huge thing that just woke--. I mean the whole striving for education in Mississippi, Alabama, at least the places where I worked, was incredible. Just people who you could not get to come out for voter registration, if

you had a freedom school, which later turned into Head Start in [19]65, [19]66, if you wanted parents to come out for those meetings, they were there. They were there just because their children's education was almost more important to them than going down and voting. So we could reach a whole different group of people through these kinds of materials. And, which we did a whole bunch of different kinds. Well, maybe not a whole bunch, but it was very diverse, what we did.

So that was a lot of my work. There's a lot of sort of in the mainstream narrative about the movement that well, you've heard this. The students sat down, Martin, no, how did it go? Rosa sat down, Martin stood up, and Lyndon [45:00] signed the Civil Rights Act. You know, and so after the Selma march, and the signing of the Voter Rights Act, and nobody ever thought to ask well, how are you going to get people down to the polls? And who's going to do that? Well, we had boots on the ground, nobody else did. So, SNCC had a lot of work to do still in [19]65, [19]66, and [19]67. And the sort of mainstream narrative was oh, they're not doing anything, you know, nothing's happening. There was so much going on. Especially in Mississippi, but all in Alabama. And Georgia, around economic things that people wanted to do. Of course, voter registration, educational things that people wanted to do, health things. In a sense, that lightning struck with the students coming in. You know, and breaking apart things. And it's like, a second Reconstruction. It's like all of that energy that came after the Civil War, when the federal troops were able to protect people, and all that they did, the 2,000 schools they built across, it was very similar. Very similar in the South, in the mid-'60s, almost to the '70s.

[Recording camera turns off and then on again]DC: So were you still based in Selma during this time, or did you start to move around?

MV: I moved. Yeah, I moved to, I went to Mississippi, and I found a little house, there's Tougaloo College, and then across the state road, there was Tougaloo Village. Where people who worked at the college lived. Little shotgun shacks. I had inherited a house that I took over from some other people that had come down the summer of [19]64, I took over the rent of that house. And then, Bobby Fletcher and I built a darkroom. Because in order to do these books, if we wanted to show black people doing things, well we had to take those pictures, because there weren't any kind of general photography files anywhere. Excuse me. Anywhere that would show that, I kept begging Bobby, well come with me to Batesville and take these pictures for my books. Finally he said, "Why don't you just do it yourself?" I said, "Because I don't know how to work a camera." So that's when he told me that there was a man named Matt Herron, who was a commercial photographer, and he lived in New Orleans, and he was really an ally of SNCC, as several were, and that he said he would take any SNCC person and have them come stay with him and Janine for a week, and he would teach them to shoot and develop film, and print. I thought well, I guess I'm going to have to do that, because if I can't get Fletcher to help me with these books, they're not going to happen. So, I had some grant money, as a part--that's all these, you know, that continued--the foundations that supported me, there were two or three, and they kind of continued their support of the work. Because they saw stuff coming out of it. So, I went and spent--this would have been the spring of late winter of [19]65 I spent in New Orleans, spent a week, and learned to shoot to print, which was Matt's approach. Matt was taught by a person who

was a student of Ansel Adams, so there was this whole, It's like this black and white documentary photography, we learned to grayscale, It really wasn't just pick up your thing, it was like, here's how you compose, it's like move, move yourself to get a good frame shot. You don't just stand there, and it was--I was truly blessed to have that kind of, even though again it was just a week, but it's like everything else that happened to us. It was Intense, it was such an intense week, and of course I did some pretty crappy work after that, because we only learned available light photography, I--and we had no automatic anything. I had to learn the hard way, some really thin negatives and some very thick negatives is what I ended up some, in the beginning. But, that's when I started the photography part of it. And a part of our responsibility as SNCC photographers was to cover any events, because the sense was cameras were an extra eye on a situation, and might protect the marchers.

So, I did cover the Meredith March. I have a number of negatives on the Meredith March, and I actually found that I enjoyed--I really liked photography. But it wasn't the only thing I did. I didn't identify myself as a photographer. I am today, in some circles, identified as a photographer for SNCC, but I wasn't at the time. Because I was doing it in service of these other--whatever organizer, SNCC organizers needed in the communities, they would ask for help and we would produce something. [50:00] So, that's how the photography thing came about.

DC: And you were often there with a camera, in the middle of it.

MV: Yeah.

DC: Were there other female photographers?

MV: I don't think so. Well actually there may have been, because I found out later, but as far as on SNCC's staff, no. But there were people who came down, I think there's a woman named Cathy Cade who did some work. There's another woman, and I think she just died, who did also some work, but--and they may have been attached to magazines, or I'm actually not quite sure. But as far as being full-time in the field, there were nine of us who were SNCC photographers. We had the only photography department of all the civil rights organizations. Martin King and the SCLC kind of cultivated photographers who would capture the stuff they wanted. We didn't do that. You know? Because our purpose as SNCC photographers was to show not the celebrities in the movement, but to show the local folks who were the leaders, without which the movement could not move. A lot of us had some really good stuff. We, and some of it's been captured in this exhibit that just finished in Allentown at the museum, called *This Light Of Ours*. And it has a great catalog. A lot of artwork.

DC: This might be a strange question, but did the camera help you to see things differently in any way?

MV: No, I think the camera was expressing the way I was seeing. Because I already was living in the black community, it's not like I came from New York, and discovered a beautiful black child's face. I mean I was already surrounded by that, you know? And the camera like, helped me frame it, and capture it.

DC: So what were some of the other places that you went with camera, or without? Other projects that you worked on?

MV: Oh, later as I moved to New Mexico, I ended up--I did about fourteen rolls on the Poor People's Campaign. Showing mostly the Latino participants. And I think

there's been a lot of work on the African American participation in that. I did a lot of that. And I have some really interesting--most of my stuff that came as a part of the Chicano movement, as I have sort of migrated into that, has not really ever been seen. Because except for that which I was able--which we had thirty-three Latino newspapers across--this is, now we're talking 1968, [19]69.

DC: Well can you take us out of SNCC then, and your journey there?

MV: Well, I, there was a lot of work that I was engaged in. I was working with Miss Hamer, I actually did her first autobiography. We taped her, me and Julius Lester, and transcribed it, and created this book.

DC: Can you tell us just a little bit about Miss Hamer?

MV: Oh, she was, [laughter] she was, it's--I don't know, it's like I remember, I was helping a little bit her campaign when she was running for office after the whole sort of debacle at Atlantic City, and the FDP started running its own candidates. I'd be at her house often, and plus we were doing this. But just the sort of, I showed up with one of my sisters, I don't remember who it was, one afternoon. Because, I told her I was coming. And so she met me at the door, and she said, "Are any of you pregnant?" And I said, I looked at my sister, "Are you pregnant?" [Laughter] She, I, "No." "Are you sure?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "Because we're cutting up hog here, and it will spoil the hog if either of you are pregnant." You know, and who knows? There might have been something to that, honestly. Hormones. So, well then of course if she's in the middle of something like that, you just don't go in there and so there we are, cutting hog, which leaves your hands so beautiful [sarcasm]. But, and taking the fat out to Pap Hamer, I have this great picture of Pap Hamer in the back with a big black kettle, and boiling oil,

and he's making what we called chicharrones and so this started this conversation between me and Miss Hamer, I said, my dad loves those. I said, they're called chicharrones. And then we started talking about sort of similarities between Mexican, at least flavors, black eyed peas, and pinto beans, and corn tortillas, and cornbread. Not exactly the same, [55:00] and then Miss Hamer always used like these, the red chili flakes in her collards. And that's practiced too, in--so we'd have these great conversations, and she was just like, really easy to talk to. And very, very committed person. And a lot of people don't know this about Miss Hamer, when those food trucks, donation trucks, would come down from the North, and she was on that sort of railroad of that, there were I think about four or five white families that she knew were just dirt poor, and she would always get them supplied with any of the stuff that came down. She was a person, she didn't understand why we didn't want to have this project in [19]64, with all these white students coming down. She didn't understand why SNCC folks had--some SNCC folks had issues with that. And I think finally, because she spoke up after oh, just hours of debate, she said, "Look, I don't want to be a part of an organization that doesn't want to reflect the kind of society that we want." And it's like Charlie Cobb said, who was a SNCC worker, he said, "You know," because he really disagreed with it too, as did I, as did a lot of people. He said, "You know, we're here to serve the people here. If that's what Miss Hamer and the other local folks want, we'll do it." So, it was, yeah she was something else.

DC: OK. So you're working with Miss Hamer?

MV: Yeah, I worked with her for a while. But it was--. I was really distributing the books, I had film strips, I did a film strip because the people in the--well this is a

whole technology that we learned, there were some supporters in New York who told us about, that they could build us a film strip printer, which was this sort of long thing about this high, and what you did was, you, we storyboarded the--and shot the frames. And then, we bought positive film and laid that down, and put the negative film on top of it, and expose it for so long, and then developed it. And that was the film strip. They were really cheap, you could make them for ten cents apiece. You could do like twenty-five a day. You know, and because the feeling was, we knew people responded so much better to visuals. We also knew that our organizers couldn't be everywhere. So, we did a script for it that just went frame by frame, so that if those of us who had worked on the film strip weren't there, it didn't matter. Because, and then we had these little envelopes that the script would fit into, fold it in half, and at the end of it was a little canvas bag, and that's where you stuck the tin with the film strip in it, we could send it off to anybody anywhere. In fact, I know I made film strips for this, and there's not one left. They just got nationally distributed through the co-op, what's it called? The co-op organization in Washington, DC. I can't remember the name. Because there were so few materials showing people doing co-ops, and basically, anyway, it's--I did one at the request of the people trying to organize the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union. And they said, would you go and document Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers, and how they did things? So we could show the people up here in the Delta that there are other people who have done this? Who have faced a lot of terrible violence in trying to do this union. So, I did.

We had had a couple of volunteers that worked for SNCC, a lot of people don't know this too, is that they came to--this was Marshall Ganz and George Ballis, I believe, who were volunteers for SNCC in that summer of [19]64, and who came to the SNCC

staff meeting that September and came up to me and said, "Listen, we want to ask if SNCC would be willing to support the Farm Workers Union with a couple of surplus cars and CB radios, because the union like, really needs them." And we did, we had a fleet. And Ruby Doris took them from people who were messing them up, so she had them in the yard. So, and he said, "So we want to put this proposal before the body, and would you support us?" I said, "Yeah." So, I supported it, and SNCC did. They sent over at least two, maybe three Plymouth Valiants, and about two or three, maybe five CB radios. I'm not sure what else they sent over. [1:00:00] So we were the first, SNCC was the first Afro American civil rights organization, really because Cesar had tried to get Martin involved, and that didn't go well. I knew about those two guys. I called them up and I said, "Look this is what people in Mississippi would like. So can I come over and shoot some frames?" And George, who was a fantastic photographer, who died I think this year, he said, "Yeah, come up, let's do this." So we shot together, and he already had some files. And so, we put together a script in collaboration with the people at the farm workers, to make sure I wasn't going to screw it up. And then George helped me with some photographs, and I did some of mine.

DC: What's George's last name?

MV: George Ballis.

DC: OK. Yeah.

MV: Yeah, he was a great photographer. He did the farm workers mainly, but he did, for a while, work on SNCC stuff. I think maybe just a summer, or a year. So, Father McKnight, from Louisiana, northern Louisiana, was--he was an Afro American Catholic priest who really believed in co-ops. And really believed that the movement had

to get involved in economic organizing. And so, he pulled together a meeting of people who had been--plantation workers who had been thrown off their plantation because they tried to vote, and were living in tent cities. And just a variety of people, he just invited people down. And he asked me to come, and to show the film strip of the okra co-op. And I said to him, when I got there, I said, "I have this film strip about the farm workers, could I show that too?" And he said, "Oh yes, sure." So, I guess it was the second or third day, and I just showed it, it was up on the walls of the church hall, and it showed, you know, the farm workers, and the sheriffs carting them off to jail, because they were picketing. And it showed all the hard work it took them, and what they were doing. The opposition and everything, and after it was over, there was like this dead silence. And I thought, "Well, this one didn't work very well, did it?" It was like, there was like nothing, you know? And then this older gentleman got up and he said, "You don't know what it feels like to know that we're not the only ones." I can never say that without crying. He just like, it blew him away. He had tears in his eyes. You know? It just, it was like wow, it's just not us black people. You know, there's other people that the sheriffs are trying to beat up, too. So, that had an interesting impact on people. The mistake we made--.

DC: Does that have an impact for you, too?

MV: Well, it was very reaffirming of our decision. However, there was a mortal flaw in our decision to do film strips. And that is, we assumed in every school there would be a film strip projector.

DC: I was going to ask about projectors, right, right.

MV: And if there were, that didn't mean that any organizer could just automatically get one, because the schools weren't always supportive of the movements. Some individuals were, but the schools felt jeopardized by supporting. Or, in the really poor black schools, there weren't any film strip projectors. So, we made a technological, a decision, thinking how smart we were, to use accessible technology that was cheap, never thinking it through totally. But, they're there for the record, I guess.

DC: So how long did you continue to work with SNCC and how did that part of your journey ()?

MV: You know, when this whole supposed decision that was taken in SNCC, which is really not a decision at all, that people who weren't black would be thrown out, that's not my experience. And it, however, I think that John Lewis was very hurt when he was not reelected chair, and he didn't like the ideology, well some of us didn't either, but there wasn't that much. It was so blown up in the media, and there were people--. Anyway, I'm here to tell you today that that narrative wasn't accurate, because about three, two months, not even two months after that meeting, where Stokely was elected, and the decision was made that SNCC would be governed [1:05:00] by an all-black executive committee, which it basically was anyway, from the beginning, any of us who weren't black, and worked in SNCC, accepted the fact that those were our leaders, you know? Stokely and Ruby Doris sent out this letter to all SNCC staff, said, as we know, but they were personalized. And the letter to me said, "We understand from the SNCC photo department that you're working with Miss Hamer on her campaign. That's great, we want you to keep us informed. As you know, we made this decision about SNCC

governance, and it's not for circulation but we want you to have it." So basically, I never got thrown out of SNCC. And--.

DC: So the basic message was, keep doing what you're doing.

MV: Yeah. Yeah. But stay in touch. And then the next year, there's a SNCC staff list that's out, and it's like, two Mexicans and about five white people on it, and there's seventy-five people on it. So the whole thing about people being thrown out, people who wanted to work, like Bob Zellner, in the white community, were told no, we don't have the resources for that. If you want to work in the white community, we don't really want you to do it as part of SNCC. They just said no. So, and I felt bad for Bob, because he was right there from the beginning. He really put his life on the line. And so that was a tough one for him, because there were people like Bob and Casey Hayden, and a number of other white Southerners who had felt that they had grown up in SNCC since [19]60, [19]61, before I came, they really felt this sort of band of brothers, and they were. There was this whole sense of dedication to nonviolence, dedication to, integrated kind of living, Charles Sherrod was adamant about doing an integrated project in south Georgia, where you could really get hurt for that. And so, there was that commitment. Some of us who came in by late [19]62, early [19]63, we weren't philosophically committed to nonviolence, it was a strategy. We--I know I brought my gun down, because I was going to defend myself, I had--was not part of, and there really weren't a huge amount of SNCC people that were philosophically nonviolent. Most of us were tactically nonviolent. And yes, this is like we were brothers and sisters. But, it's like I don't know, it's something, after Atlantic City, after the three civil rights workers got murdered, there--we had so much anger against the system, that just basically couldn't see. Couldn't see what was

going on. And I felt so clearly after working with the black history stuff, as I mentioned before, and seeing how that affected people's identity, you just had to do that. You just had to do that, basically say we control our organization, and how important it was, so what happened then was that there were some folks who were so upset with the decision, they went to different foundations, and basically, my support got cut off. You know? Because I continued to--I wouldn't repudiate, I mean that was the first question when I walk into a foundation office, was do you support Stokely as--do you support black power? And I'd say yes, and I explained why. You know? And it was like, I wasn't being heard. It was like, so my money was dribbling to an end. I did work for the Child Development Group of Mississippi, doing some basic reading things, because I had trained myself in the reading kind of stuff. But that was to support SNCC projects where those head starts were really a part of SNCC action in those communities. And as I said, reaching into pools of adults who didn't want to mess with that voting stuff, but would be there for their kids. So that was a part of--those of us who stayed, and those from the community who continued working, I don't know how some folks did that, but they just kept on working. And they didn't have any support from the SNCC office. You know? Because money was really coming to an end. Yeah. So then--.

DC: You mentioned one other Mexican American on the list. Can you talk a little bit about--.

MV: Oh, Eliz--Betita, Betita Martinez. Yeah. She ran the New York office. We were, people would kind of like to lump us together a lot. But we had such totally different functions. She was so good at what she did. She ran the New York office, she [1:10:00] developed this whole network of supporters, she found not just money

supporters, but she found people who could help us with that, film strip makers, she was just a genius at it. I worked in the field. I never worked in any office, I basically worked with communities. But yeah, there was just the two of us. There was a young woman down in Laurel Mississippi, that came from California, a Mexicana, and I don't remember her name, but she didn't stay after about a--it was a badly run project and she basically felt ostracized. So, that was it for Latino participation, really.

DC: So after the money dried up, basically, what decision did you make?

MV: Well what was happening was, I did have money enough to finish up, and I was going to finish whatever I had started. But Julian Bond had called me the fall of [19]66, and said, "We're having this new politics conference, we've invited Reies Lopez Tijerina, who was a land grant leader from New Mexico, because we're trying to make this, you know, multicultural. And we don't know if the man speaks any English, or we just want him to feel comfortable, would you please come," and be like a hostess, or whatever. I said, "Sure." Because I was curious about this person and this courthouse raid business, and land grant stuff, which very few Chicanos knew about land grants before Reies did the courthouse raid. Very few. I met Reies and spent a couple days kind of making him at home, feel comfortable, and this is the fall.

DC: And had you learned Spanish?

MV: I was pretty poor at Spanish. When I lived and worked in northern New Mexico for thirty years, it got better. Got a lot better. Because you have to use it, or you lose it. But Reies was fine in English, he didn't need any help. Anyway, I got a letter from him about two or three months later, saying would I come work for him? And his agenda was, I found out later, he really felt the Afro American civil rights movement had

gotten the nation's attention, and the world's attention so effectively, he wanted to kind of coattail onto that, and get the land grant movement recognized, too. You know? And so he felt I could be a bridge between, you know, the civil rights movement and the land grant movement. So, I thought well, I had offers to go to Crystal City, Texas, to work on a radio station, in the Chicano community. I had offers to go over to work for Cesar.

And I thought to myself A, I'm not ever moving again in my whole life, because I am so tired of moving. [Laughter] And B, I can work on a radio station, or I can work with the farm workers movement to better things in the field. But the people that I saw could take fully beneficial use of the movement for black power, for empowerment of black people, were those farmers, because they had their own land, and they weren't going to get thrown off the plantation, and yeah, they were a little economically--but land owning, and how important land owning is for people to be able to really empower themselves to take control of their lives. And to me, the land grant movement represented that. It's like, is the same thing going to happen to Latino-owned land in, especially New Mexico, where there's a lot of it? And of course, most of it's been lost in Arizona and California. I mean, we're sitting on land grant right now. Which people don't know, here in Pasadena. But if we lose that land base, I mean we're going to just be--and when you're landless, and you can see this now in the South, so much black land has been lost. After the Civil War, there was a huge amount of black land ownership. And now it's down to like, less than one percent of one percent. And there's no base for people. You know? So, it's--. I was worried about that happening in New Mexico, and any places where there was still.

I decided to go work for Reies, to move to New Mexico. I had no idea, they said they'd pay me \$7 a week. Oh, I'm used to that. I've been doing that since I left college,

you know? [laughter] It was \$9.64 with SNCC, \$7.50 [1:15:00] with YCS, and now I'm going to make \$7 in New Mexico. I'm downwardly mobile.

Crew: ().

DC: So what were some of the first things that you got involved in there?

MV: Well I kind of watched for a while, my training. And I thought, you know, he would, because he just had a huge amount, see, one thing about the land grant movement is that it's been going since eighteen, let's see, Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was 1864. People kind of didn't worry about it too much until land speculators started coming into New Mexico, and stealing land away from the land grants. And that's when people tried different ways to, whether going to court or whatever, to try and keep, because they were protected by the treaty. They are the only non-Native American people in this country protected by treaty. And their land was supposedly protected. So, I thought gee, he's got this great base, I'd sit in his Albuquerque office, and I'd watch these sort of little old, I mean the average age of the land grant movement member was probably like seventy-two. But it's like, they come in and they'd have their jeans, they were neat and pressed, you know? Clean. Not to say that, but worn. And battered hats, and they'd come up and they, he was so charismatic, they kind of treated him like a god. And then I watched, and they'd slip like a couple hundred dollar bills into his hand. So, wherever--and maybe it's because they sold their cattle, it would happen a lot in the fall, because that's when the cattle gets sold, and the sheep. So you'd see people just coming down and giving him the money, he had this great loyal following. But he never went--hardly ever went north. He hardly ever--I mean, they all came to him. And I'm like hmm, how does this movement work, anyway? Who's organizing this? I suggested to

him, let's do a newsletter, that way we can--oh no, no, he didn't want to do that. Well, I didn't know what he wanted me to do. So what happened, because I joined him the end of [19]97, maybe early [19]98, somewhere in that bridge between [19]97--.

DC: Sixty?

MV: Oh, [19]67, sorry, [19]68. Well then the organizers from the Poor People's Campaign came through. So he kind of shoved, said, you know, you take care of that. I did whatever, I don't remember what I did, but I did. Because there was lots of logistics. We sent a bunch of people. And so then I ended up going, and living, we, there wasn't room for us in Resurrection City, and the--Corky Gonzales, and Reies, because that, we didn't have, I don't know, who came from California? Some of the Berets came from California. You know, a bunch of them.

DC: So we talked to Carlos Montes, and--.

MV: Did Carlos go?

DC: --he was there.

MV: He was there.

DC: And Gloria Arellanes was there.

MV: And the woman who was the leader of the welfare rights organization in LA. It begins with an E, I can't remember the name.

DC: I don't know either.

MV: But basically, the men didn't want the women down in Resurrection City, in tent city, because it was swamp, they just didn't want it. So we, somebody had scored us a whole school. And they got us bunk beds. And then we had communal meals together. So that was quite an interesting experience for me. I don't know how the

SCLC folks did it. Because Martin had just been assassinated, and they're trying to organize this thing, it's something that Martin wanted to do. I think he was really on the right track, in terms of how you begin, I mean, this is something that Malcolm X understood, too. How you begin to build sort of multicultural coalitions. And both, isn't it interesting, both of those men got cut down? As they are involved in that. I'm not a conspiracy theorist, but I will say if either one, or both of them had lived, you would see a different movement. You would have seen a different movement come out in the late '60s and early [19]70s. But as it was, they were cut down. And you just could look at the SCLC people, and I don't know how they put one foot in front of another. You know, they wanted to do it, they were passionate about it, but they basically run roughshod over the rest of us. They made the decisions. This is their crusade for their man, their martyr, and I guess in a way we should be happy we're along on it. Well, of course, Chicanos, we don't put up with that shit. [Laughter] So, we just went and did our own actions, you know? We went to the State Department to talk about the treaty. Went to the Department of Education to talk about racism in education, went to the [1:20:00] Department of Justice to talk about police brutality. Had our own marches. You know, and then the Puerto Ricans, who were so, they were really very great in deciding OK, this is funny, the way it's going. And they had probably planned to do this anyway, so they had a whole big fiesta one day where they had food, dance, music, and then we all went across the bridge to Arlington to Robert Kennedy's grave. And that was a really interesting day to watch. We learned about the Puerto Rican issues. The, I think some of the Young Lords were there as security. And they and the Brown Berets united. I mean there was some really great interactions that went on at a much lower level than the

SCLC heads, Reies, or Corky. There was people, there were people making relationships. And I remember hearing people, we were at the Harwood--not the Harwood School, I can't remember the name of it. And there was a contingent of people from West Virginia, or some part of Appalachia, and they came in, and they needed housing. So they stayed with us. And I remember hearing the women say, "They're poorer than we are. They don't have any," so they started collecting t-shirts and stuff for the kids, and took them in, so there was that kind of stuff going on between people, just at, we did a lot of stuff with the Native Americans, because they had not very many people in their delegation, so we beefed it up with our guys. [Laughter] Excuse me. So that was an experience, and I came back from that and I was like, yeah, I don't want to work for Reies anymore; he's a patriarch, he's a patron. And the boys, for various reasons that I won't go into

DC: So before we leave DC, can I ask a little bit about some of the others that were there in that delegation, and the role that Corky Gonzales played?

MV: Corky was really experienced, he was active in politics in Denver, and he kind of understood the way things worked. And so, while Reies considered himself the leader of the delegation, Corky was de facto, I think, the leader. And it was, what I don't know is how they--if they made liaisons with the different departments, or tried to. And then, he might have put his daughter Nita on this, to try and get appointments. Sometimes we got appointments, sometimes we didn't, so we just showed up. It was, we were there maybe a week or so, and probably every other day we were going to some different place to plead the cause for what was happening. Because there--and I think this is true at the time. No sense inside in the Beltway about what was going on in Latino

communities. The extent of police brutality, the extent of poverty, the extent of really poor educational, the whole land issue, all of this, we just knew people didn't--they just didn't know anything about it. So you did--but I mean the hope was, we could get some kind of press to cover it. But I think we may have once or twice, but rarely was there any--. The education department, however, I don't know who organized this, they did hold a hearing. And that was pretty good, a lot of people got up and testified about conditions in their schools. I can't tell you, like a lot of individuals involved, but to say that different groups from different parts of the Southwest and the West did have agendas that they wanted to speak to, to the people in Washington, in however a form we could devise. Because we weren't, I don't believe we were getting help with the SCLC on doing these things. So we just did it ourselves.

DC: And did Corky represent a sort of different leadership style?

MV: Urban. The urban Chicano.

DC: Yeah.

MV: Yeah.

DC: OK. So you went back and you decided to make a change?

MV: Well I went back, and at that point, I was working on what we called the Chicano Press Association, because as I said, there were thirty-three papers. And we were trying to develop a news service, where we could get photographs out to each other, and get news stories out to each other. I helped organize, and actually I helped organize kind of like a Southwest-wide meeting on the Chicano Press Association. And then, was [1:25:00] involved a little bit in some stuff around Albuquerque, was involved with two newspapers, because I was using my photography, was also writing articles for *Por Que*,

La Revista Por Que in Mexico City. I knew the author had met Stokely somewhere, not the author, I'm sorry, the editor, and he and Stokely got along really well. So when Stokely heard I was going back to visit some relatives, he said, wrote me a note, and he said, "You look up Mario, and you tell him Stokely said hi." I did. So, one thing lead to another and pretty soon I was doing stories for them. In the meantime, I had met Reies's older brother, Anselmo Tijerina. And Anselmo was living and working up in the Tierra Maria area. And his view was that it's just not enough for this land grant movement to rely on this leader, in residence in Albuquerque, to make the moves around the land grants. That the people themselves should do some work. And he had heard that I had helped with some co-ops. So he started talking to me about, do you think you could help us put together--we decided what we're going to do with the land up here is instead of just talking about it, we're going to work it. Because it hasn't been worked for a number of years. Because people, the markets were so bad that it didn't--people couldn't hardly afford to work it. But we're going to plant potatoes. () we're going to plant potatoes, and then we're going to market them. We're going to have a hog farm, and we're going to do all these things. And I got really interested, because I was like, gee, that's a lot about the stuff, you know, that we were doing in the South. And I said well, thanks, but I am working on this Chicano Press Association thing. And doing my own writing and stuff, news stories. And then I get this call at three o'clock in the morning one morning, saying that because oh, then he had come down and said to me, we're going to do a clinic. And I said, what? He said, "There's a clinic up for sale, because the doctor that used to serve us was called to Vietnam, when he came back from Vietnam, he didn't want to live here anymore. He wanted to go and live and work in a city. He's

done with us.” He said, “And we need a clinic, because women have babies on the side of the highway, if there’s like a car accident, people bleed to death. We need to have a clinic. And I said well, God, how are you going to get a doctor? I said, this is, this was a little beyond for me. I wasn’t going to go there. And he said, well thanks, but we’re going to do it anyway. So he was working his little networks, and then I get this call at three in the morning, that somebody tried to burn the clinic. And what happened was, some of those Anglo bankers and ranchers up there in the Chama Valley said to themselves, if these folks get a clinic, that land grant movement’s going to be legitimized. We can’t have that. So they hired some folks to just torch it. And it, it torched the northern end of it. I mean it structurally was OK. It was just like, awful. I thought oh, crap. This is Mississippi all over again, I guess I’m going to have to go. [Laughter]

DC: Now someone else would have gone the other way.

MV: Yeah, I was like what’s wrong with me? It’s like, I went up, took pictures, and we started talking about raising money for this. I guess there was some insurance on it. [Jimo?] had gotten the Presbyterian Church involved, they agreed to kind of take out the mortgage, and work with us on it. That clinic today is, oh let’s see, we started it, really saw the first patients in [19]69, it’s operating today. It’s still going. Because of just people saying we’re going to have our own healthcare up here, you know? And it was part of that whole empowerment scenario. Again, I mean this was all we worked with in SNCC. Black power meant, to us, people empowering themselves to create these institutions. And if they wouldn’t let you in, you create your own. Alternative institutions came out of that SNCC experience. And that sort of northern New Mexico

involvement that I ended up in was just a direct transition to that. Or translation of that whole thing.

DC: Well it reminds me too of the Black Panthers and the health clinics that they started.

MV: Exactly. Yes.

DC: Yeah.

MV: All of the stuff that they did, which is so overlooked. Although more and more is coming to light about that, I think. Which is a good thing

MV: It's like really very long to go into now, that's thirty years of work that ended up mostly building alternative institutions. First around healthcare, then around how do you have people keep their land productive, because you've got people coming from Texas, California, mainly, buying up the so-called empty land, which was ancestral land, belonging in a family, but they couldn't afford to work it, because the markets were so bad. So, [1:30:00] I worked with a bunch of livestock growers, and weavers to add value to traditional sheep that were grown there for years and years, until the United States Department of Agriculture said they were unimproved, terrible sheep, get rid of them. Which made people even poorer, after they did that. You know? So, the outcome of that is that we did manage to preserve this nearly extinct breed of sheep that both the Navajo weavers and the Chicano, the Hispanic weavers, depend on. Managed to create four or five businesses out of either the meat or the wool, or whatever. And in a sense, it's a model for how people can work, but it also a model that says that this country is not going to help people invest in the research and development of both products and services that could be used to revitalize economies, important economies, important rural

economies, that have a cultural base to them. So, you can do the model, but boy, you have to just catch that brass ring of funding, and when it's gone, it's gone, and there you are. Your businesses, we do have two businesses that are still, that came out of that, that are still operating, out of the five that we started, actually three, I'm sorry, three out of the five, and they're where they should be, they're housed with the individuals that basically, the businesses would benefit. But, yeah. I learned a lot about the ability of this country to just not support people empowering themselves. I mean, we have these rural, I mean these urban ideas about power, you know? But very little is looked at the rural, which is the taproots of our various cultures across this country. They came out of rural areas. That's where families used to send their kids. So their kids could get connected to their culture. You know? They'd send their kids south to Greenwood, Mississippi, or they send their kids to Taos, New Mexico, or wherever, if they had moved to California, go back and see Grandma and get to know your people, and all your relatives back there. So, there's just a tremendous loss in terms of culture, economics, and environments, because somehow we don't know how to--it is said we don't know how to do it, but we really do. We'd just rather put money someplace else. So.

DC: OK. Talk to me a little bit more about the importance of economics, in terms of power, and uplift, and self-determination.

MV: Well it's often said in New Mexico, at least, and I think this was true in Mississippi, too. The white people got the money, the brown people got the politics. Which isn't really--. So you have domain over whatever you can politically manage, but the money, and money is rooted, especially in, you know, the west here, in the Southwest, and in rural areas across the Black Belt South, is rooted in land, and what you

do with that land. You know? And so, land ownership in this country is every bit as important as it's been talked about, in terms of South American countries and I'm really rambling right now. You're not going to get very much out of me.

DC: No, no, no, I thought you were cruising actually.

MV: I'm just kind of like, going like this. [Laughter]

DC: Great. So Maria, as we move towards wrapping up a little bit, I wonder if you could just reflect a little bit about some of the more recent work you've done, and maybe some of the connections that you see.

MV: One of the things that has just floored me, in a sense, if that's a good way to put that, is how the undocumented student movement has developed. And I don't know, like I'm not real literate in everything that's going on in this movement, because there is so much going on. They just had a big meeting of about 900 people that showed up in Houston from all over the country. Students that had been doing this kind of organizing around undocumented issues. They've done such a beautiful job in California, in their organizing, in terms of--and they've got a lot of allies, [1:35:00] so they can go to school for in-state tuition, and there's just a whole lot of things that they, victories that they have won. What's astounding to me is so many of them tell me, we study SNCC, they said, and I said, "Really?" They said, "Of all the civil rights movements, that's the one we feel is the closest to us. You know, the values in SNCC, how we're sort of moving, we're anti-celebrity leader of an organization. We feel like we all are doing this together, we're in teams together." I'm astounded at their courage. I know of some that purposely got detained so they could then work with the detainees

and say, here's the telephone number of a lawyer, do you know you have these kinds of rights? I mean, that takes so much courage to do that.

And they're such a force. They really, their movement is just, they went through kind of what we went through there was this time in the early sit-ins where it was about getting a hamburger. And then Miss Hamer wrote this great article saying it's bigger than a hamburger. And they kind of went through that too. It was like, this is about us because we've been in this country, this is the only thing we know, and we need to have this kind of relief, and then it was like, hey wait, no, it's bigger than that, it's our families too, and they need to be included in this. And so then, they moved wider, which is a big, courageous move, because they did have some successes, at making it around young people who wanted an education. So they could contribute to this country, and to their families' lives. And so, they are just heroes to me. They're people that I look up to, I feel like they have taken the best of our legacy so far, and are moving it into an area that is so important to us in this country. Not just as a Latina, but this country needs really, I mean, Latino populations have revitalized whole cities and towns across this, the Midwest, and so many other places. You know, people that have just anyway.

So, this has made me realize that A, when you're in that kind of seventeen to thirty-five group, you think everything should happen like tomorrow, and it doesn't. It, it's like fifty years later, it feels like so much of our legacy has been written out of history books. You have to really spend, that's what a lot of my teaching's been about over the years. I taught SNCC as a case history for sixteen years, just kids saying to me like, why didn't I learn this in school? I said, precisely. You know, and it's--they're carrying our legacy on, and I hope that they can hang in there, and I'm not going to counsel them to be

patient, because they're at their best sometimes when they are impatient. But they also, I remember there was a period of time where the leaders were saying, we're going to stop some stuff right now. We're going to stop all the Facebook, all the Twitter, we're going to stop everything. We've got to reflect. And I remember Miss Baker telling us, after [19]64 and that horrible convention and what happened with that, that we should take time and reflect, and we didn't. And we paid for that. And they went through this kind of thing where they worked so successfully in Congress to get the DACA--and I'm not explaining it very well, but it's, what does the DACA mean? Do you know? You can't fill in the blanks? It's relief for undocumented kids that were born here, and--or came here at the age of two or three. And would be, they would not be on--couldn't get deported, if they did certain things. Served in the military, finished their high, their college, there was certain kinds of things, and then they could be on a road to citizenship. And they just about got it through. And it, it didn't get all the way through. And they went through that same setback that we did in 1964, when we were trying to get the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. You know, but I think they've done a better job at we're going to regroup now, we're not giving up, we're going to be as strong as we've ever been. They're so supportive of each other, I guess I want to kind of like end by saying that even if it takes fifty years for the best aspects of a movement, to be able to go into a generation, might not be the next generation, or even the generation after that, but it will be there if it is as solid as I think our kind of approach to building empowerment strategies was. That's all I'm going to talk about. [Laughter]

DC: Very powerful.

MV: There she wrote.

DC: So we are wrapping up here. I just want to acknowledge that we have Maria's wonderful daughter, Sabina Zuniga Vereva also here with us. So you did hear her on the tape a bit. And finally, I just want to say thank you. Thank you for your work, and for sharing with us today. We really appreciate it.

MV: Well, thank you for doing this.

Female 1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, March 26, 2017