JANICE WESLEY KELSEY INTERVIEW
THE SOUL OF AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Janice Wesley Kelsey
Civil Rights Activist
September 6, 2019
Interviewed by Elyse Frenchman
Total Running Time: 1 hour, 8 minutes

START TC: 01:00:00:00

Growing up in Birmingham

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

Growing up in Birmingham, I thought I had a pretty normal life. From a very large family, we lived in a close-knit community and my parents were very protective of us as kids. We had house rules like you had to be in the front yard, on the front porch when the streetlight came on. I knew all of my neighbors, they knew me. They could correct us in any way necessary. And I was protected from I guess some of the dangers and the ugliness of Jim Crow. I was aware of segregation because I would travel sometimes on a bus going into downtown Birmingham and there would be blocks of wood that would separate whites and colored. And sometimes getting on the bus there would be no seats available in the colored section and many seats available in the white section, but I couldn't sit down. I did not like it, but I understood that

that was the way it was. I would also see if I went downtown separate restrooms, water fountains, even the restaurant in many of the department stores, they would be on the first floor with swivel seats and just look so inviting, but I could not sit. I could buy a hotdog but I would have to stand and it would have to be in another area of the store. So, there were things like that that I was aware of, but I was not physically confronted with Jim Crow's laws in the other respects. Everybody in my community looked just like me; everybody in my church, everybody in my school, so I really didn't encounter a lot of indifference. My parents basically protected me from it. They did not discuss in our presence what things they were subject to. And in fact, I was almost an adult before I knew some of the things that they had been subjected to. I didn't see it, I didn't know it.

Janice's memories of her family members experiencing racism

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

I remember my dad coming home one night. He worked two jobs. He worked at US Steel and in the evenings, he would work at a supper club as a waiter. And he came home one night and he was talking to my mother and I heard him tell her they took my light bill money and I thought, who, what? I didn't get up and question that but later I did get to understand that the police would often stop the men who worked at the supper club, have them to

empty their pockets and they would take their tip money after they've worked three or four hours after a regular work day, that they would take their moneys. And it was the policemen who were doing it. There was nothing they could do about it, so I thought -- I think that's something that stuck in my mind and I may have been eighteen before I had heard that conversation. I remember riding the bus with my aunt, my mother's sister, and she would put her hands on my shoulders, and I didn't like that but she was kind of keeping me in my place and I didn't like it, but I knew why she was doing it. So, I wouldn't get too close to that section that was reserved for whites.

Growing up going to church and learning about racial discrimination through James Bevel

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

I was always a part of a church. My parents were very active in church. My father was a Deacon; my mother was director of vacation bible school. She taught Sunday school. And we were a part of the youth choir and whatever was going on in church, our family was always involved. My school, my high school, Ullman High School we had a lot of pride in our school. I thought, looking back, the standards were pretty high and I thought I got a good education. It was something that James Bevel said to me that really propelled

me into the civil rights movement. In talking to us following a regular mass meeting, and he would ask some questions. One of the questions he asked, "How many of you take typing at your school?" And I raised my hand because I was a good typist. And he asked, "How many electric typewriters do you have at your school?" And I said, "We have one. I get to type on it because I'm a good typist." And he said, "Do you know how many they have at Philips High School?" And Philips was an all-white school, of course I didn't know. And he said, "They have three-rooms of electric typewriters. They don't even practice on what you have at your school." And I thought, that's not fair. And he gave some other examples that made me feel that I was being mistreated. Then he said, "You're getting a second-class education." And that really was the turning point for me, that if I could do something about it, I was all in. He talked about, well, one, he asked, "How many boys? Any boys from your school play football?" And my brother was present with me. And he said, he asked, "Have you ever wondered why your helmets are always blue and white but your school colors are green and grey?" And my brother said, "We always paint them the right colors." He said, "Yeah, but why do they come in that way?" And we didn't know the answer.

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He said, "You're getting Ramsey's discard." Ramsey was a high school not far from our school. And I thought, they're getting new stuff and we're getting their old stuff—that's not fair. He asked, "Have you ever looked at the copyright date of your textbooks?" I'd never looked at the copyright date. I

knew our books were old because one of the first things we would do during the first days of school, we would have to erase all of the other words out of the textbook pages. We'd have to wrap the books with newspaper or brown paper bag. So I knew they were old. And he said, "You're using outdated material." And I thought, wow, I'm really being mistreated and I didn't even know it. So, listening to James Bevel and hearing him say I was getting a second-class education, that really touched me in a way that motivated me to be involved. This was actually the first mass meeting that I attended and after—toward the end of the meeting, Bevel came forward and asked teenagers to meet him in the churches fellowship area. And we went there and he polled the audience and we cheered when he called our school names and then that's when he started asking questions.

Birmingham nicknamed Bombingham because the Klan threw dynamite at homes

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

Birmingham was nicknamed Bombingham because there was so many unsolved bombings. I lived in a community that was not far from what we called dynamite hill. Dynamite hill was a middle-class neighborhood. Lawyers and teachers and doctors lived in that section and on a very regular basis they would have dynamite thrown in their yards. I didn't perceive that in the way that it may have been intended because I just thought it was a nickname,

dynamite hill. And the streets were paved and the homes were nice and we would go to that area to skate and we would call it dynamite hill. But on a fairly regular basis, somebody would have dynamite thrown in their yards. I never read anything about who or how their homes were damaged or who might have been hurt, I just knew it was dynamite hill. I've heard the noises from the dynamite sometimes but I didn't interpret that at that time as being someone is being hurt or targeted to be hurt. It became obvious in conversations with other kids that the Klan would ride by and throw dynamite in the yards of the homes of some of the people who lived there, as well as some of the churches. It was never anything that I read or anyone set me down to talk to me about. It was word of mouth from one kid to another as to what they heard. There was never any real discussion about what did happen, who was doing it. The Klan I think their main goal was to inflict fear to keep African Americans in their place and there were outspoken ministers, they would target their churches, lawyers—I remember Arthur Shores who represented people who had legal fight about something to do with their civil rights—they would target his home. I didn't really know at the time why these homes were being targeted, but I did come to understand why.

Shedding fear and standing up for her rights

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

I think that people became sick and tired of being sick and tired. And so, when that fear is gone, you don't have anything to lose. And I think we had gotten to that point. So much had gone on that had not been addressed until there was—the fear factor was no longer a big thing. And we had fearless leaders—Fred Shuttlesworth, he wasn't afraid of dying, he wasn't afraid of the police. He had been subject to a lot of abuse and there was no stopping him. And so that lessoned the effects of the Klan, because the fear factor was no longer there. When I participated in the children's crusade, I wasn't afraid at all. Now that may have been I was being naïve but I was not afraid. A part of the appeal in the crusade was that God was on our side and having been raised in a Christian home and been in church, if God is on our side, we can't lose. So, it was both a spiritual thing, that there was no reason to fear and a little bit of being naïve that anyone would do anything to hurt a child.

Mass meetings and learning about nonviolence

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

The mass meetings were being held on a regular basis I think originally on Monday nights, different churches across the city. And how I knew about it, I had a girlfriend whose mother and sister sang in the mass movements, choir. And she would come to school and talk about the mass meetings. And the things that she said excited me. She talked about the crowds; oh the church is

just packed. I like crowds. She talked about the music, that the music was just off the chain. Everybody is clapping and rocking and I like good music. She talked about all these cute boys that come to the meetings. I like cute boys, so I thought, oh wow I want to go to one of these meetings. So, I went and when I got there, it was everything she had described. The music was just great. It seemed that everybody in that choir could—had beautiful voices. And then the messages from Dr. King and Fred Shuttlesworth and N.H. Smith and John Porter, these were names of preachers that I was familiar with, that they were well respected, and the message that they were giving the audience responded to it. And all of that just kind of engulfed me and made me just so glad to be there. I think that set the tone for what I ultimately became a part of and in these student nonviolent workshops that I subsequently attended, we learned freedom songs, we saw some film strips on previous demonstrations, sit in demonstrations and that kind of thing. And we heard the message over and over again that this is a nonviolent movement and if you can't handle that, if you feel like you have to respond then you should not participate in this. We'll let you make some posters, something, but we don't want you marching if you feel you got to fight back. So I had it, I had a made up mind that I could handle whatever was coming and be nonviolent.

Committing to nonviolence

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

If you fight with them, A., you're going to lose, and B., you're no better than they are. We are not going into this battle with a physical approach. God is on our side. We're going to be peaceful and we are going to express our desire for change and we're not going to engage in a physical warfare. So, I understood that. Yeah. And we were told to expect it, expect them to call you a name. Don't respond. Someone may even try to hit you. Kneel, say a prayer, sing a freedom song. You are not to respond in the way that they respond. And I heard that over and over again and I was convinced that was the way to do it. I think that there is strength in standing up to opposition without physically engaging in violence. And I may not have doubted in those terms then, I just accepted what I was told, that that was the way to win this battle. Some white officials did not like it if a black person looked at them eye to eye to respond, and I never really had that encounter with anyone so that was not my experience, but of course I had heard that the expectation was to look down if a white man or woman was talking to you in—like you're in submission or something.

Becoming a part of the Birmingham Children's Crusade in 1963

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

I was so excited about being a part of it. I would talk about it to my friends and encourage them to come to a meeting. And some of the meetings were kind of impromptu. We walked a lot. We walked home from school in groups and I remember one evening we stopped at the A.G. Gaston Motel and Dr. King came out on the balcony and spoke to us and encouraged us and told us that we didn't have to be afraid. And Dr. King at that point to me was not an icon. He was a minister, so I respected him in that position. He was a leader in the movement; I respected him in that position but I didn't see him as what we see him as today. He, to me, was the same as Dr. King…Dr…Reverend Shuttlesworth, Reverend Porter or Reverend Smith, some of the other ministers whose names I was familiar with. But to hear him and others speak like that, it was encouraging. I think James Bevel introduced the idea to Dr. King and I think Dr. King and other leaders were hesitant to put the children out front. But Bevel's relationship with young people was powerful and his words were and his—the way he communicated with us, I thought all of that led us to have confidence that it was alright to do this and to do it like this. So talking to your friend about it was easy, you know. Reverend Bevel said we can do this and in our meeting we learned these songs and the songs we would clap and rock when we sang them and so it was exciting. And in my mind, everybody who was somebody was getting involved so it was the thing to do. Well, actually he told us in that very first meeting that if our parents got involved, they could lose their jobs and there would be no one to take care of us. He said, but you really don't have anything to lose. And I thought, he's right, I don't. I don't have a job so I can't get fired and if I'm out of school and

everybody else is out of school, not much can happen with that. And I believed that.

Putting children on the frontlines of the protests

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

Leaders were nervous. It was a controversial decision. Of course, I didn't know that then but years later I read that you know, there was some pushback on putting the kids out front. Parents would be afraid. I know my parents were. And I didn't want to be discouraged so I didn't discuss my plans with my parents.

The beginning of the Children's Crusade: D-Day, May 2nd, 1963

01:21:28:00

JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

D-day, May 2nd 1963. It was a Thursday. I woke up with my mind on freedom. I was so excited anticipating what would happen. We had been told that we would need to bring something, some basic toiletries with us. So I had packed my purse with soap and toothpaste, toothbrush, all the things I had thought I would need for an overnight stay. I had my sister's leather jacket because they said it might be cold inside. And I was just excited about what this was

going to be like. As I got ready to leave the house, my mother sensed something was going on. The radio was on; the DJ was talking in coded language that I understood. And my mother said, "Janice, I'm sending you to school. Don't you go anywhere and get yourself in any trouble. I don't have any money to get you out." And I said, "Yes, ma'am." That's what she needed to hear. And I was going to school. I just wasn't going to stay. So, we walked and on the way to school we talked to each other singing freedom songs and asking each other, "You got your stuff? You ready, you gonna stay?" So when I got to school, I was a little hesitant about my GPA.

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And I went to my first period teacher and asked, "What if some kids walk out of your class today? Are they going to fail?" She said, "If everybody walks, there's nobody to fail." For me, I interpreted that as it's okay to do it. And of course, I shared that with everybody I knew. "They aren't gonna do anything to us, all we got to do is leave." And the bell rang, people started walking in the halls. The halls were packed with people and we walked out and walked from my school to 16th Street Baptist Church. Got downtown and there were people everywhere. There were poli…a lot of policemen there, too. James Bevel and Andrew Young were at the top of the stairs at 16th Street and they called out to say, "If you're here to participate in the demonstrations, come inside the church." And we went inside, we sang some freedom songs, they said some prayers and then they lined us up in pairs and we walked out singing "We Shall Overcome". We didn't get very far, maybe a block away

before we were stopped. A police officer who stood in front of us announced that we were in violation of a city ordinance that we could not parade without a permit.

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He said, “Get out of this line and nothing’s gonna happen. Stay in this line, you’re going to jail.” What he said didn’t bother me. I knew I was going to jail. Looking at him did... I had never had a face-to-face confrontation with a white man. A. I was not accustomed to disobeying adults let alone a white man. And he was wearing a gun and he had a stick in his hand, so I felt very much intimidated by what I was looking at. Somebody started singing “We Are Not Afraid,” and that just gave me the courage to remain there and to sing loud and to be arrested. They called paddy wagons; paddy wagons picked us up, carried us… we were only told to only give our names and ages because if you identify who your parents were, there might be consequences on their jobs. So I gave my name and I said I was fifteen, although my birthday had come in April and I was sixteen. But my girlfriends and I decided we wanted to be in the same place so we were all gonna say 15. And they carried us to juvenile court which at that time looked like a house to me and there was so many people there. We were laughing and talking amongst ourselves and more people were coming in and we were greeting those that we knew. And by late afternoon, there were so many people there they called for school buses to come and pick us up and I had never been on a yellow school bus and I got to sit on the front seat so I was excited and we were jumping around

singing and that school bus carried us to the county jail downtown. They took our purses, they made mugshots and fingerprints and locked us up. And that's where I spent my first night in jail, at the county jail. We sat on concrete floors. They had a commode in one of the cells that there was no privacy partition around it. They did separate the boys and girls. I remember that evening or that night we were served some food by trustees and the trustees were black men and they were asking, "What are all these kids doing here, what's going on?" And we were happy to report, "We're here to get our freedom." It somehow empowered me that I'm doing the right thing. That's how I spent D-Day. I felt I was on the winning team. Even though I was arrested, even though police did it, I felt that I was still winning, because, ultimately, we got what we wanted. We got out of jail, signs came down, I could see some change as a result of having been a part of that. And I was also told so many times that love was the way to get through this. And so, hating, feeling some disparity against someone else, that never crossed into my mind.

Understanding the significance of the march when she was a teen

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

I did not have a clue that this would be…would have the significance that it ultimately had. I was marching because I had, because I felt that I had been

personally mistreated in my school and I…that really hurt me to think that I was getting a second-class education—that was not fair. And that's what I was thinking I was fighting for. I didn't realize the depth and the expansion of what was going on with Jim Crow's laws. So, no, I had no idea it would have the effects that it did have. I was impressed when our President John Kennedy came on television and addressed what happened in Birmingham in the children's march and he kind of reprimanded the city officials for mistreating the children during the demonstrations. And I just felt so proud that I had been a part of something that the President of the United States had paid attention to. That just really made me feel some kind of way that this was important. I still did not know the impact that it would ultimately have. I guess it wasn't until September the 15th that this really became reality that what I had been a part of had been so significant that it affected the lives of people on a much broader scale.

16th Street Baptist Church Bombing

01:31:23:07

JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

I told you I was familiar with dynamite hill. So, bombings were not foreign to me—dynamite, although I had not experienced it personally -- I didn't know anybody personally who had been affected, but that Sunday morning, I was at church and our Pastor announced that 16th Street Church had been bombed

and the church just went up in shock. “Oh, wow.” People were making noises like that and I thought, 16th Street Church, that’s where I went to get my training, that’s where I marched from. And they bombed 16th Street and it’s on a Sunday morning. People are in there. He went on to say that, “I understand that there have been some casualties.” And he dismissed church. We went home and our telephone was ringing just incessantly, ringing. My mom answering the phone and I would hear her say, “No, it’s not our family. No.” And eventually I got the message maybe from one of my older siblings that people were caught looking our number up in the phonebook and saying they heard that one of the Wesley girls had been killed. Well I was from a large family. It was two girls, my sister and myself. My sister was teaching school. I was the one who participated in the march and they said one of the Wesley’s had been killed, and she said not our family.

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Later that evening, we found that the Wesley girl who had been killed was Cynthia Wesley and she and I had been friends. People thought that we were related because I was from such a large family and everybody at our school whose last name was Wesley was one of my siblings, except for Cynthia. I had met her when she was adopted by Gertrude and Claude Wesley, who were friends of my family. Cynthia did not participate in the demonstrations. She was at church getting ready to sing in the youth choir. She was 14, a 9th grader at Ullman, I was in the 11th grade. And when she came to Ullman, I acted like I was her big sister showing her where to hang out at recess, talking to her

about who the mean teachers were. And when I heard that Cynthia was the Wesley girl who had been killed, I was devastated. I'd never known anyone in my age group to die let alone be killed and to be killed at church just added insult to the injury. And other names were revealed that I knew their families. Denise McNair's father, Chris McNair, used to be our milkman. He delivered milk and juice to our home. Carol Robinson, her father was my band teacher in elementary school. I did not know Addie Collins' family, but she had a sister who was in the same class with one of my brothers and it felt like—it felt like to me that maybe they got the wrong kid, they got the wrong Wesley girl 'cause I'm the one who left school and went to demonstrate and went to jail and they killed Cynthia. I just—that has been the hardest thing for me to come to grips with in all these years, but I think with that occurrence, I began to recognize the significance of what I had been a part of but I could not talk about it for a very long time because it was so painful. What I realize in these latter years is if I don't, then somebody might not know what it took to get to where we are and we still have a ways to go. The cruelty of the whole matter became a reality to me. I didn't think that anybody would hurt a kid like that, but those men who planted that dynamite apparently didn't care who was affected by it. And the fact that I knew her so well, it affected me in a very real manner.

The need to share her experience in honor of those who died at the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

If they were trying to destroy the people who had demonstrated, then she was…none of those girls were involved so maybe they got the wrong person. And then I thought they were angry perhaps because some of the high schools had integrated and I had a girlfriend who was a part of the integration at West End High School, and I just felt bad about the whole matter, that it would come to something like this. And that was just to me the ultimate sacrifice to make change. And when I finally started to talk about this, that's why I did talk about it—that's why I do. Because the people who made that ultimate sacrifice can't speak and those of us who knew them and loved them I think we have an obligation to share this. I don't think it mattered to the people who inflicted this pain, who, what age, whatever. And I think looking back that whomever it was that gave their life for a cause, it wouldn't have mattered if she was white, black, blue or green, the fact that a life was given for a cause, a cause that she wasn't trying necessarily to fight for, but a cause that she died for.

Double D-Day: the second day of the Children's Crusade

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

Well, the second day, what we called Double D-Day, the commissioner of public safety was Eugene 'Bull' Connor and he was in charge of firemen and policemen. And to I guess disperse the crowd, he had firemen on hand, he had policemen and their dogs, the German Shepherd dogs. And the crowds had swollen so he called for the firemen to turn on the water hoses and the force of the water was so strong it pushed people down, tumbling in the street, pressed against the buildings. Some girls reported their blouses were torn, skin burned. I had one girlfriend who reported some of her hair was sheared off her head with the force of the water. In the park, there were the dogs and they were attacking the kids. Some people went to the hospital with dog bites. Some people had their clothes ripped; the national media was here and showed this on television. I think seeing that nationwide, it embarrassed our local officials and it caused pressure to bear on the local officials to do something about it, which ultimately led to the end of the demonstrations and the concessions that were made by the city officials. I think it awakened their conscience to how far someone would go to stop the voice of the people. Bull Connor was extreme in his methods and to see children treated like this, the whole nation rose up in arms. I mean, people had children; they wouldn't want their kids treated like that for marching and singing. They weren't fighting, they weren't posing a danger. So why would they be subjected to that kind of treatment?

Eugene "Bull" Connor

01:42:24:00

JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY

He was—Bull Connor was the commissioner of public safety. At the time in 1963 he was being ousted. The city was changing its form of government from commissioner to mayor-council. Bull Connor was protesting that. While it was in court, he continued to serve in a capacity while the mayor handled another capacity of city business. He was not well educated. I understand he had maybe a third-grade education. So, I think in his own ignorance he said things and did things that he thought would bring favor from the people. Ultimately, he was ousted and a change of government did take place. He used his power in wicked ways. I don't know if that is the real reason that the form of government was changed, but I think he was an embarrassment for the city and so some people did want him out because he lacked—he lacked intelligence.

The purpose of the Children's Crusade

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

We were fighting to have an equal access. What was pointed out to us was the level of inequities that existed. I knew segregation; I understood it as being separation. I didn't get it that the equality was not present. There was no

many inequities that went along with the separation and that's what we were fighting for, a level playing field.

The effect of children being able to march

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

Well there were many more children than adults. Early in the spring there were adults who marched, some college kids, some college-aged kids. And it wasn't effective because there was so few because people couldn't get off their jobs and go and march so it didn't become a problem for the city until thousands of children were in the streets and nobody was in school. That became a problem and so it had to be addressed, and how Eugene Bull Connor addressed it, well, what he meant for bad turned out to be for our own good. Because his behavior brought attention to it and, therefore, we were able to get some change—enable change to occur. And I guess following what we did and then the assassination of the President, that just spurred change at a more rapid rate to cause legislation to be—to go into effect with the Civil Rights Act.

The end result of the Children's Crusade

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

Dr. King and Fred Shuttlesworth called the marches off after that. Well, it would have been the 7th day of the marches because they had sat at the table with the city officials who agreed to make some concessions. One was to, the retailers agreed to hire at least one black salesperson in their stores. They agreed to remove the colored and white signs over the restrooms and water fountains. There was progression to—toward the integration of the schools in the fall, so those items caused the leaders of the movement to call the marches off because we were getting some of what we were asking.

Global impact of the Children's Crusade

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

All over the world it was being reported what happened to the children in the children's crusade, how insensitive it was to subject children to that treatment. And it actually served as a model for demonstrators later. I think it definitely gained support because people saw that if you unite under one common cause and do it in a nonviolent way, that change could occur. And it was change that we could see and I think that inspired people to be a part of the movement definitely.

The fight for voting rights after the passage of the Civil Rights Act

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

Well, voting rights, denying the right to vote had also been a problem. Blacks who attempted to register to vote were denied access because first a poll tax: you had to pay to register. Secondly you had to take a test and the tests were unreasonable. Things like how many bubbles on a bar of soap? Or how many beads in this jar? People who were well trained like college professors went to take the test and were denied because of things that were not reasonable questions to be put forth anyway. So that was addressed and I think Dr. Jonathan McPherson was the first in our area who passed the test to register to vote. I remember years later my mother told me when she took the test the first time, she was asked to name the superintendent, the state superintendent of education, and she didn't know his name and so she didn't pass the test. And I remember her saying how she studied everything and went back again and did pass the test. So, addressing specific issues like voting rights -- we had gotten the signs taken down. We could ride in the front of the bus. Now we needed to make a difference where we could really make a difference and that is in the voting booth. And people became more aware of the significance of that and more people started trying to register to vote and I think as that grassroots group started, it just expanded. People in other counties wanted the right to vote, too. Selma, I guess was the next front for the battle.

Persistent grassroots work for years leading up to the Children's Crusade

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

Students at Miles College, that's my alma mater, the President of the student government at that time was Frank Dukes. And he…Frank had been in the armed services, had gotten out and enrolled in college. He and some others who were older students had, had a selective buying campaign and they asked people not to buy new clothes for Easter. That was probably the year before the children's crusade. And they were passing out flyers saying, "Why shop where you can't work or where you can't try on clothes?" And I think this was a way to raise awareness of how unfair this treatment was. I think bringing people to the campus speakers who are already a part of SNCC to inform the student body as to what was going on, what the mission was, what we can do, how we can do this. I think that, that's where it all began in this area. Well not really because Fred Shuttlesworth had been fighting even years before that. You know, he had gotten beaten up when he had tried to register his kids at Philips high school in downtown Birmingham. They beat him and his wife, so it had—the need to do something about what was going on had been going on for quite a while. I think the Children's Crusade may have been the culmination of things that had been going on for a long while.

Recognizing that legislation only goes so far and issues of racial discrimination persist

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

It felt like we had overcome. We've gotten something out of this that I never expected, and I thought that was a good thing. I felt good about having been a part of it. I still felt sad that there were some unforgivable consequences to get to that point. Getting that bill signed into law, I thought that was the culmination, I thought that was the end, that we've gotten what we wanted, we are where we need to be. Of course, I do realize now that legislation is not enough. It doesn't change the hearts of people. And until that happens, we're going to continue to deal with the kinds of issues that we deal with today. Until we get to know each other, interact with each other, and appreciate the diversity of each other, we're gonna continue to have problems. Laws are needed but you can't legislate love. You have to talk to people and interact with people and understand people before you and love them and accept them and accept their differences.

Anyone can effect change

01:54:45:10

JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

You don't have to be in charge of a movement to make a difference in it. I certainly was not in charge of what I participated in. But yeah, it would not have been successful had it not been for ordinary little nobodies doing their part to make it happen. I appreciate the leadership that was provided by Dr. King, Shuttlesworth and others to point us in the right direction. But if we had not followed, it wouldn't have been a movement. So, it's important, both parts are important—to have good leadership but also have somebody following.

The need to learn from the past and continue to fight in the present

01:55:39:03

JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

If you don't know your history, you're likely to repeat it. And, what I see going on today is so reminiscent of what I saw in the 60s. Some of the rhetoric, some of the behaviors of people in leadership is frighteningly familiar to some things that happened over 50 years ago. So, it may be time for another movement. I hear remarks from leaders in our country that remind me of remarks I heard when leaders like George Wallace ran for President. I see a parallel in his behavior and in his message when I hear our current President making certain remarks. And it makes me think the more we change the

more we stay the same. All of this legislation and enlightenment and empowerment and we are still dealing with basic human issues of inequities and not accepting diversity and opposing people who are different. That's what was going on then. I see that going on now.

The importance of being aware of present issues, educating yourself about history and the effectiveness of nonviolence.

01:57:31:23

JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

Become aware. Awareness is important. You can become aware by knowing your history, studying that so you know what did happen so you can recognize it when you see it again. Also, take some lessons from what did work and what didn't work. Fighting fire with fire did not work, has not worked, will not work. A peaceful demonstration is what brought change in our society. And I think that's the model we need to follow. Also know that you don't have to be in charge to make a difference. And difference can be made in small circles that can have a ripple effect, whether it's speaking against bullying in your environment or sexism in your environment or racism in your environment, you have a voice—use it. And it doesn't have to be used for hate, it can be used for positive change, for understanding, and I encourage children to do that. Children led the way in '63, we're counting on them to do it again in the 2000s.

Janice becoming an educator

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

I became an educator because teaching was something I always admired. My mother's sister was a teacher. I spent a lot of time with her and I admired what she did. I became aware of her friends, I admired them, looked up to them. There were teachers in my community and my own teachers, I just liked doing what I saw them doing. And my sister became a teacher before I was out of school and so these—some of the people that I admired the most were teachers. I think that's what inspired me. And when I became a teacher, I loved it. I loved the children, I loved sharing information, I loved seeing the ah-ha moments in them. And so, I think that was just really my calling to be a teacher. After working my first year in an all-black school, it was a very large school and I had many, many classes. I taught science and some kids came for 30 minutes, some kids came for an hour, they alternated on the days they came but there was absolutely no equipment available to demonstrate concepts with. And I would go out and borrow equipment from my college, but I wanted to expose them to things that they had not been exposed to. The next year that I taught, I was transferred to an all-white school, middle class setting. And I was amazed at the difference and the availability of the

equipment and resources, the class size, the number of classes. It was like I wasn't in the same system.

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It made me feel sad knowing that we've passed the laws and we've gotten some things straightened out, but these differences still exist. And I worked for about seven years in the all-white situation. Initially coming in there were parents who would come in, sit in my class, would question things that I would say to the children but I didn't have any real conflict. There were some teachers who initially didn't speak, but I would go on and speak to them anyway. One of the black teachers whose also transferred that year said to me, "You must be crazy. You speak to these folk and they don't open their mouth." I said, "There's a little dog that lives next door to me. He doesn't speak either but I speak to him every morning." So I just—that's just who I am. I'm gonna speak, I didn't care if they responded or not. Come in, "Good morning." They didn't have to say anything. I'd sign in and go back to my class. But who, by and large, were accepting were the children. And I had a great relationship with almost all of them. And by the time it was time for me to transfer, I got so many nice gifts. In fact, when I got married, I was at this school. My principal and his wife were professional performers, they sang at my wedding. Some of my co-workers attended my wedding. By the time I got pregnant with my first child, every class was giving me a baby shower. I

mean, it became a natural thing. People weren't looking at me as being a black woman, but as a teacher that they liked. And it also emphasized to me that once we interact and get to know people, we get beyond skin color and look deeper at who the person is. That was my experience.

Importance of what happened in Birmingham in 1963

02:04:17:11

JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

It's a moment in history that I hope will not be overlooked for several reasons. Four big reasons: 16th Street Baptist Church. Also, on that same date two other kids were killed. Two other kids died that day. One at the hand of police, one at the hand of two kids who had just left a Klan rally. But a lot of blood sacrifice took place to make change happen on the scale that it has happened and I think enough blood has been shed already. We can just start talking to people and stop fighting people.

George Wallace and similarities between him and some of today's leaders

02:05:11:14

JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

Seeing him on television and hearing him shout, "Segregation today, tomorrow, and forever," I didn't like it. I felt badly that someone from my state would go on the national scene and continue to spew out things that divide us, and I didn't feel that he represented the masses of the people. But I came to know that over time George Wallace came to know that skin color didn't really matter so much because he had to be cared for by a person of a darker skin tone. And it didn't matter to him then whether she was black, white, blue, or green. But he needed someone to care for him and to understand him and to communicate with him. I appreciated seeing the change that occurred in him before his death. But on the campaign trail when he was alive and vibrant, he was so divisive in his message and I hear some of those divisive messages today. I hear messages from leaders that I don't think bring us together. The message divides us.

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy

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JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

Oh, that was horrible. When it was announced in school, we cried. You know, I watched all of the things that were going on on television. I stayed up late just listening and watching it all and I thought, I thought the world was coming to an end. They've killed the President. And that followed just a couple of months after the death of the kids at 16th Street. I thought it was just coming

to an end. I was relieved I guess to see that Johnson picked up the mantle and pushed for the passage of the Civil Rights Act. But yeah, that was very hurtful.

Respecting President Lyndon B. Johnson

02:07:57:01

JANICE WESLEY-KELSEY:

President Johnson earned my respect because he pushed for the passage of the Civil Rights Act and that was a part of the legacy I thought of John F. Kennedy. I'm sure he stepped out of his comfort zone to get that done so yes, I admire him for doing that because that took some courage and I'm sure he got some pull back from some of his supporters for going that route, but he did it.