JOANNE BLAND INTERVIEW
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Joanne Bland
Civil Rights Activist
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Interviewed by Elyse Frenchman
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START TC: 01:00:00:00

Growing up in Selma

01:00:09:11

JOANNE BLAND:

Well, I grew up during segregation and now when I talk about it, I realize I had anything but a normal childhood. I thought it was normal. I was happy, I played games, I had friends and we hung out and I went to jail. I thought all the children were fighting for—all the children all over the world were doing the same thing that I was doing. I grew up in George Washington Carver Homes, which is a housing project where -- and I called it my area of love because everybody there loved me and I loved everybody there. That no matter where you were, somebody was gonna take care of you. And because of the treatment we would get when we'd leave that area of love, my grandma and my dad sheltered us. We rarely ventured from that area. When they transacted grown folk's business, when they had to leave the area. So we didn't, I didn't really feel the brunt of segregation until I left that area, but I

remember wanting to sit at a lunch counter that was at one of our drug stores and my grandmother said I couldn't because colored children, that's what we were called then, can't sit at the counter.

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Didn't stop me from wanting to sit at that counter. Every time I'd pass by, I'd see those kids in there and I'd wish it was me. Well, one day we were standing in front of the store and my grandmother said, "When we get our freedom, we can do that too." Now, I already knew that Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. But my grandmother was fighting for a freedom that was even better than that. This was the good freedom that would let me sit at that counter. And as I grew older, I real—there were several incidents growing up that made me feel not so good, and for lack of a better way to put it because the color of my skin, it made you really aware that blacks in the United States, colored people as we were called, didn't have a lot of rights. And that's what made me become an activist, to—that's a new word, we weren't called activists. To be involved, to get involved in trying to get the freedom that grandma and her friends were fighting for so I could sit at that counter.

Witnessing and being a victim of racism during her childhood

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JOANNE BLAND:

My first one was…maybe about eight years old. We grew up poor and my grandmother, we had relatives in the north in Detroit -- I should say the Midwest. But they would send us boxes of clothing to help grandmother with us, right? My mom died when I was three and my grandmother and my dad raised us. So they would send these boxes maybe three times a year but the Easter box was my favorite because my Easter dress would be in there and Easter was a big holiday in our community. So my grandmother opened that box, she pulled out the prettiest blue dress I have ever seen in my entire life. Now, I have two older sisters and they always got the best stuff so I knew one of them would get that dress, but my grandmother said, "Here baby, go try this on." And I looked behind me to see one of my sisters there and nobody was there. She was talking to me. So I grabbed the dress and I ran upstairs and I put it on and I instantly turned into a princess. I was twirling around and my grandmother and my grandmother said, "You don't have that dress on yet?" So I ran downstairs and when I got where she could see me on the steps she said, "Oh baby you look so pretty. That's your Easter dress." But I was either blessed or cursed with big feet.

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None of the shoes in the box would fit me so you know what my grandmother did? She looked at me and said, "I'm gonna take you to town Saturday and get you a new pair of shoes." I was ecstatic, I had a new dress and I was gonna get new shoes. But I, we were, before we left the house, my grandmother measured my foot with a string and cut it at length and she put it in her

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pocket. So I'm skipping down the street and the store, the shoe store at that time had a window on Alabama and a window on Broad. It was the only store downtown that was cattycorner, right? So when I got beside the window, I saw my shoe. You know what I'm talking about. That shoe. My shoe. So I ran into the store and I put my foot in and before I could settle in it and my grandma had snatched me out of there. She was just going off, "Don't you do that again! Don't you run away from me. You stay right here. Right here beside me." And I was so embarrassed I wanted the ground to open up. While she was chastising me, the clerk was picking up the shoes. And she found the mate to it, put it—them in a box and she walked over to my grandmother and in her nastiest voice, said, "Here." And my grandmother said, "Those are not her size." Said, and she reached in her pocket and she pulled out the string and she said, "If you would get this size, I will gladly buy them." The lady said, "You don't understand. That little nigger put her foot in it and nobody else can buy it. You have to pay for these." So my grandmother bought those shoes. And on the way home because I didn't get any shoes, I couldn't wear those big shoes with my new dress.

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I knew I had done something so wrong, really, really wrong. But I putted my foot in that shoe and I didn't understand 'cause there was other people there trying on shoes, right? So, my grandmother saw I was about to cry and she said, she leaned down and she said, "Honey, you can't—black people, colored people can't try on shoes and clothes. It's the law." I didn't know that or I

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wouldn't have done it. I said, "But grandma, I don't have shoes." She said, "Don't worry about it, we'll find a way." So I had to wear my brand new beautiful dress to church that Sunday with the shoes that I had gotten—had worn all year, all the last year. And I felt like God had forsaken me because the preacher was up there talking about Jesus died for me and all of this and how did he forget me? And as I grew older, I realized it wasn't Jesus's fault, it was those evil people who would even come up with laws like that. It wasn't a constant because I didn't run into, we didn't, I didn't interact with whites and you're young and you're resilient but you never forget. There's always something that will remind you or make you hesitant about doing certain things and because you don't want the retaliation so you just…Grandmother said we were fighting for our rights and our freedom and I believed that so I started to do that too. I wanted to fight for my rights; I wanted to sit at that counter. By the way, I never got the chance to sit at the counter. The store had—there was some young men here in Selma who decided to integrate it and the owner called the Sheriff who had no jurisdiction at the store to come in but he knew that the Sheriff was volatile and that he would probably bring his posse and they would beat up the young boys as a lesson for them—for others not to try. Well, those boys obviously flunked nonviolence 'cause they tore up the store, right? And when they put it back together, when he put the store back together, he didn't put the counter in. My dad said, "He saw the writing on the wall. He would have to let me sit there."

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Learning about the Jim Crow laws

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JOANNE BLAND:

The best educational part of that we got from SNCC from going down to First Baptist Church to the meetings of SNCC and the young people and participating with the young people at mass meetings. Mass meetings were mainly designed to motivate people and get the word out and see what was going on. But they were also attended by adults. We attended mass meetings but the masses were the adults. Down at First Baptist where SNCC had headquartered was the best place for us and that's where we learned about that we could have, that we could do this and we could do that. That was our constitutional right and all of this. And back then we also had civics in school. It was a subject that you had and you learned that the consti—the Constitution was written and you learned the laws of the land and the state and then wonder how they made laws that excluded you when this says, you know… but they did.

What the mass meetings were like

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JOANNE BLAND:

Mass meetings were always packed—always. And we always had some speaker: Dr. Vivian, C.T. Vivian, Dr. Abernathy, Dr. King. And people would come and what I liked about the mass meetings the most was the songs and the spirit of the movement because as a child, one of the ways to engage was to sing songs. And we had people like Jimmy Webb who was as tall as we were, right, that would come and sit with us and we'd make up songs, alright. He'd take an old spiritual that we already knew, everybody sung it, like this little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, right? And add verses that when you say, I'm gonna let it shine all in Montgomery, at the capital, all in Wallace's face. You know, we'd be, and we would add a verse. Somebody would point at somebody and somebody say our verse and that night if we had a mass meeting, you hear your verse. The whole church is singing what you said. You know what a lift up that was to be able to hear the whole church sing? Now, mass meetings I think in my opinion were mostly designed for motivation, to keep people motivated and to disseminate information.

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The, I remember one time at the first mass meeting, I didn't, I don't remember it but the first mass meeting they tell me that the Sheriff's deputies and posse lined the back of the church to hear what was being said but mostly for intimidation and took down people's tag numbers that were there. But people didn't stop. They came anyway and came to the mass meetings and they would be packed to hear what was going on. People were hurting and they were looking for that motivation. But you know, the Selma

movement was primarily fought by people here in Selma. If you study Dr. King's history, you know he never went anywhere that wasn't already organized. And Selma was no exception with the formation of the Dallas County Voters League in the 1930s. So somebody had been working at least 30 some odd years to try to, for voter registration before Dr. King came. And he also never went anywhere he wasn't invited. A letter was issued from the Dallas County Voters League inviting him to Selma and when Dr. King would come, you couldn't even get into church.

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You know I could 'cause I was a kid but you couldn't even get in the church wherever he was, it was just packed, I mean, packed to the gills. But most of the mass meetings were like that, not just when Dr. King came but just packed. Somebody would get up and give us a speech, a sermon, as the preachers would say. And some of them they was in there for information they had too and get up. There's a scene in Eyes on the Prize where Reverend Bevel, James Bevel said he was going to walk to Montgomery and he was gonna go if he had to walk alone. "How many of you are gonna walk with me?" And the whole church stood up, so… that—those are the kind of things that happened at mass meetings. I remember once all these preachers came from all over. It was just—maybe the Monday after bloody Sunday and they walked into church and then the preachers wore the white collars and the black. All of them walked in with those collars on, it was amazing. We were like, oh my God. It had to be hundreds of them because to a kid it looked like a

thousand. But they were everywhere. They walked in and everybody stood up and started clapping because Dr.—and then I found out later that Dr. King had asked clergy come, people who believe in Justice come to Selma. They came. Oh my God, they came.

The groundwork to get voting rights years before the Selma march

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JOANNE BLAND:

Oh, it's a lot more than just this—led up to the walk. And it started even before the forma -- the formalization of the league. It goes back further than that but I'm not as knowledgeable on that part as I am on the league. And I'm not as knowledgeable on the league as I should be but the executives of the committee of the league…there were eight people and we called them the courageous eight and don't you dare ask me to name them, but when they formed the organization, the formal organization, it was just for that, to try to get African Americans here to the right to vote. Sam and Amelia Boynton were farm extension agency and they recognized early on that if we could vote, we could change some of those laws that were unfair to us and then these others joined on, like minded people joined together, those eight. And even when we had a judge here to issue an injunction that we couldn't meet anymore, they were brave enough to keep meeting and keep working toward that. And Mrs. Boynton's husband Sam was beat in his office by some white

man who said that his Negroes didn't need the right to vote, that he voted for them. And he beat up Sam. And Mr. Sam never really recovered from that. And when he died, Mrs. Boynton—he made Mrs. Boynton promise that she would keep the work up. And his memorial service some people say was the first mass meeting and people organized there and started really to work toward getting the right to vote. But it was a struggle because people, the people who enforced the laws were the people who would beat you up and it wasn't easy. And it had to be really, really scary for them. That's why children played a big role in this and children play a big role in all movements, children and their mothers, which is not a side of the history that people really write about, you know? They sort of leave young people out and give women a small role. But the Selma movement was fought primarily by women and children. And when we think, when we look back and talk about this movement, I think of the women and how brave they must have been. And even the men, they had to be brave, really, really brave people to do this.

Work with young people and continuing to fight for change

01:18:07:04

JOANNE BLAND:

they're systemic. They're, I mean it's everything that we do, so, and every part of our lives and the sooner we realize that, that we all realize that, we can have some change. I don't want your babies hurt and you don't want mine hurting and that's the way the world should be, right?

Speak up for change and don't become complacent

01:21:34:08

JOANNE BLAND:

And I just heard this phrase a few minutes ago when we do good—when I do good, we all do good, or should be doing good anyway. We should be doing good, not bad. It's horrible the way the world is going. And we don't even need to talk about that because we all live here, we see it, we see feel it. And I know the young people that I see are searching, are searching for a way to make it go away. And they always ask, Ms. Bland, as a young person what should I be doing? And I'm honest. I don't know. Because if I knew, it would already be done. Why would I know what to do and not do it? I don't know, but I do know this. That you should not be sitting idly and watching it happen. You should at least be crying loud and long until somebody hears you and throwing stuff at it. Find some rocks and throw at it. I don't care what you throw at it but make sure you get the attention and that it's hurting. You know, you shouldn't sit back and if somebody's hurting you, you explain like, they. Who the heck is they? They always make these laws. No. It's who you

elect that makes these crazy laws and then we don't hold them accountable. They tell me they're gonna to do this, I expect it to be done. Or I…because that one vote is all we have and it was fought for, people died, and beat, for you to have that right. Not just here in Selma, all over this nation, that we're having those same issues, so…

Joanne's family background

01:23:32:19

JOANNE BLAND:

Grandmother was a unique person for a lack of another word. Grandmother just didn't take anything from anybody. She would just be so upset. And my dad would say, "Don't send my children down there or take my children to mass meetings. You're gonna get them killed." My dad would go out the back door, get in his car and get to work. Grandma would push us out the front door and say, "Go get your freedom." And we would go. She was a warrior, I promise you. She couldn't neither read nor write but she always on the side of right. I didn't know my grandmother couldn't read or write until I was twelve because everyday she'd make us read something. She'd bring books home from the houses that she worked in and magazines and she'd say, read that article about so and so and so and so. So I got to find the article in the book or magazine and read it and then she'd ask me questions. I had no idea that the people she'd work for had gone, she had done the same thing with

their kids. So their kids read it and she would ask questions. She was the best psychologist in the world. I promise you. She'd feed us a heavy meal in the summertime at 12 o'clock and then say, "Don't go to sleep."…knowing we were gonna go to sleep. But she was a warrior. I hope somewhere grandma is in me. I'm sure it is. She was a maid in the houses of the oppressor. She made one dollar a day in the 60s, one dollar. And that meaning she brought home five dollars a week.

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And my dad was a cab driver. We had lots of cab drivers in Selma then. That was the only way people could get around. And he drove a cab and grandma went to those houses. I remember one time being sick. My grandmother had to take me to work with her and she put me over in the corner and she would—while she was cooking breakfast, and then the white kids came in and sat down at the table. And I'm hungry as heck over here. And I'm watching them, waiting for grandma to tell me to come to the table. She never told me. And then after they finished and she cleaned up the table, got them ready for school, then she fed me. And the rest of the day she spent trying to make me know she loved me, that that's what she had to do. That was her work and she had to do that, so the rest of the day she catered to me. I got candy, she, every time she got close to me, she'd pat me or say something nice or was concerned about how I was feeling. So I felt loved. It was only at that moment that I felt that it did.

Getting arrested for marching when she was a child

01:26:45:08

JOANNE BLAND:

We were marching. We had marched from the church to the courthouse, and they led us up on buses and took us about three blocks to the city jail and put us in this little cell and it was jam packed. We were packed up in there like sardines and it was hot. It had two beds and wasn't all that clean neither. And the toilet was right there, just right there, no privacy. And the heat was the one that bothered me the most. We sung songs and all the older kids were on the—to sing songs and make us feel better. But that wasn't the first time. Let me—I digress, let me go back. My grandmother was in a march the first time I got arrested. And I counted it as an arrest because they put me in a cell with them. We marched up to the courthouse and they were—when we got there, somebody ran to the door and locked the door, then put this paper on the door that said, 'Out to Lunch.' I remember thinking, white people sure eat early. Grandma wouldn't feed us till way late, you know, like 12 o'clock. And the Reverend just stood there. So, I asked grandma, I said, "Grandma, why are we standing here?" She said, "We're trying to register to vote and it's only open on certain days." Right? So I said, "We gonna stand here till they come from lunch?" She said, "Yes." Now, I was about eight and there were babies in people's arms, toddlers, you know. Not just, I probably was one of the older children there and there was a sound behind us. Like you were—I think it's Alabama, Alabama Avenue behind us. And you could hear the traffic going

and see the cars going up and down. We heard the sound of a different vehicle and I looked back and there was a yellow school bus. And you know, during that time we couldn't ride on school buses, black people couldn't—they were for white children.

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And to my delight, the policeman started pulling the women to the bus, putting them on that bus. I was so happy. I said, "Grandma can I sit by the window?" She said, "Sure, baby." So, I got on the bus and I'm happy. I'm looking out the window. They rolled two blocks, stopped right in front of city jail. I started crying. I said, "Grandma, why are we here?" She said, "They're gonna put us in jail." And I said, "Me too?" She said, "Yeah. You got to stay with me and don't—and you be quiet. Don't say anything." And I didn't. When they put us in the cell and I was just glued to grandma, right. And then the babies started playing on the floor and I got down, started playing with the babies. So that was the first time I was arrested. Some people say it was 13. I can't remember all of them, okay. But if you were there you were arrested, so it could've been. I remember the first one and I remember being at Camp Selma, which was a prison camp. And they kept us there eight days. Eight days. Now, that was horrible. It was not a good time. And then they let us out and Camp Selma was about five miles out of Selma. They just let us out, so we didn't have any way to get home or anything. We had to walk home. But we did it. We're here. Now I'm talking to you, so we survived.

Jimmy Lee Jackson's death, Bloody Sunday, Turnaround Tuesday, the Selma to Montgomery March, and the passage of the Voting Rights Act

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JOANNE BLAND:

The story goes that he—it was a night march and Reverend James Orange was in jail. He had led a march of youth that day and they arrested the youth and Reverend Orange. But they put—let the children go that evening. And Reverend Orange said that a state trooper came into the area where they were housed with a rope. On the end of that rope was a noose. And he threw it over the top of Reverend Orange's cell. He said, he had to sit there all day with that noose in his face knowing it may be his last day on earth. That even if they let the children out, they kept Reverend Orange. The children, it was a mass meeting they had held at a church approximately two blocks from the jail. They ran into the church and disrupted the meeting, said, "You have to do something, you have to do something. Now they're gonna kill him." The people in the church decided to go down to the church and walk around, I'm sorry, down to the jail, and walk around it all night long in hopes that their mere presence would save this man's life. When they left the church, they were attacked and brutally beat. And Jimmy saw a trooper about to hit his mom and did what I would have done and he blocked it and the trooper shot him. And he died eight days later. It was then that the leaders decided to walk from Selma to Montgomery to protest his senseless death and demand the right to vote from our then Governor George Wallace. So on March 7th we

gathered on the playground of George Washington Carver home and led by John Lewis and Hosea Williams, came down Broad Street and over that bridge and met this wall of policemen.

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When they last stopped, John Lewis asked permission to pass. The policeman said there would be no march between Selma and Montgomery. You have too many, to disperse and go back to your church. In one minute, they attacked. Now, I had never experienced violence. Marching was fun to me; I liked the spirit of the movement. I told you, the songs, the chants, being with my friends and not going to school. I liked all of that. When I crested that bridge and I could see across, I saw those policemen lined all the way across all four lanes. I knew we were not going to Montgomery. As I ascended further, I saw the service roads on each side were filled with policemen—some sitting on horses, some sitting on cars, some just standing, which further affirmed we were not going to Montgomery. I was too far back in the line to hear or see what was happening. I didn't need to. I knew the procedure. I knew when John got to—when John and Hosea got to that line of policemen, one of them would ask permission to pass, it would be denied, and then John and Hosea would go down on their knees and we would follow suit.One of them would say a prayer and after prayer we'd go back to where we started from. You had to plan a new strategy or just get—just regroup and come right back. I'm standing there waiting for the front to go down and suddenly I hear gunshots and screams. I think they're killing the people down front. Before we could

turn to run, it was too late. They came in from both sides, the front and the back and they were just beating people—old, young, black, white, male, female. People laid everywhere bleeding, not moving, as if they were dead. And you couldn't stop to help them or you'd be beaten too. The gunshots I heard, nobody was shooting bullets on that bridge that day. It was the tear gas canisters being shot into the crowds. And you know, tear gas burns your eyes; it gets in your lungs. You can't breathe, you can't see, you panic. Often times you'll run right back to the same people you were running from. It seemed like it lasted an eternity. If you could outrun those men on foot, you couldn't outrun the ones on horses. They were just running the poor horses into the crowd. The horses were rearing and kicking, bones were being broken. The last thing I remember on that bridge that day is seeing this horse and this lady and I don't know what happen, did the man on the horse hit her, the horse just ran over her. I do know as I sit here 54 years later, I can still hear the sound her head made when it hit that pavement.

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The next thing I remember, I was on this side of the bridge in the back of a car. My head on was in my sister Linda's lap and Linda was crying. When I became fully awake, I realized what was falling on my face were not my sister's tears, it was her blood. My 14-year-old sister had been beaten and had wounds in her head that required 35 stitches. Yet on that following Tuesday, I held her hand as we followed Dr. King and Dr. Abernathy across that bridge. I'm not ashamed to tell the children that and you, that when I

crested that bridge and I saw the same scene I had scene that same Sunday, I tried to go back. I didn't want any more freedom. Whatever the cost of this freedom was, was just too much for this eleven-year-old. I couldn't go through that again. I tried to go back but they wouldn't let me. My sisters wouldn't let me. They kept talking, trying to coax me to cross. I remember one of them saying, "Come on, they're not gonna beat Dr. King." I went but I was scared. This time, Dr. King asked permission to pass. The policemen told him the same thing. But this time the front went down. Dr. Abernathy said a prayer and after prayer he and Dr. King stood up and led us back to Brown Chapel AME Church where Dr. King held a mass meeting. At that mass meeting he told us he had applied for court order that would give us the legal right to walk from Selma to Montgomery if we so wanted to, but more importantly, be protected. It was signed on March 17th by a judge in Montgomery named Frank Johnson and on March 21st we left Brown Chapel one more time, came over that same bridge and those same men who beat us up, had to protect us all the way from Selma to Montgomery. Isn't that a scary thought? It took five days to get to that capital. There are no motels between Selma and Montgomery today. There were none then. And remember we grew up during segregation. Probably couldn't have slept there anyway. Well, on August 6th of that very same year, about two- or three-days shy of six months later, the Voting Rights Act was signed and it removed those obstacles that prevented us from voting. We went from 250 African Americans on the

rolls here in Selma to 9,600 almost immediately and it still took us 36 years to get rid of the same Mayor that was on the bridge.

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Go figure. It's just not good enough to just vote. You got to be involved in the system. Because if you don't know who's doing the counting, they can count any way they want to, right? So you got to get involved. That's what I teach children. Be nosy. Go—so where does my vote go when it goes in this little box? Who's telling these and don't tell me the computer is doing it, you know? Let me see. Show me how you do this. The moment we did that, we had change. The moment..

The importance of voting

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JOANNE BLAND:

One lesson I used to teach the children and I draw on that all the time because it's just easier, I think it was our state senator; Senator Hank Sanders who was our—the first since reconstruction. I heard him do this lesson and I've been doing it ever since. He asked the question, "Can you tell me one thing in your whole being the government does not effect?" And some, you know, children will say, "The way I wear my hair." What do you wash your hair with? Where is it made? Don't factories have rules they have to go by and laws they have to apply what -- they can't put any chemical out. They can't let

when they're making that shampoo let those fumes and gases into the environment, as they do. But you know. So there's a way that you can get to, trace everything back to the government and the importance of the government in your life is so important. Don't you want to have a say-so in who makes those laws. Don't you want to have a voice that says, "Oh no, that's not right. Let's not do that because it's wrong." If voting was not important, why are they always trying to take it away from you? The voting thing must be awfully important. And I truly believe that it is. It's very important because it affects my whole being. And when you realize that, you run to the polls.

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You run to the polls and you—and I also advise children that when they get old enough, as soon as you old enough, run for office. Dog catcher, you don't care. If there's an election, you run for something. See, you know the problems. And people, particularly my age, will tell you what's wrong and we sit around the kitchen table and talk about what's wrong. We never offer you any solutions ever. But you know the problems, you know the solutions. You know how to solve them. You just don't know you know it yet that you could make that change and you have to realize how important voting is. And you know, particularly in the African American community, which is a good one to talk about 'cause I'm in there, but I see the young people with all this hair that they buy from people and it costs a lot of money. And who regulates that? So, it's from the clothes you wear, the hair on your head, to the soles of your feet, the government has something to say. Even when you're born, you're not here

unless you have a birth certificate. And who issues the birth certificate? You can't even die without the government being involved. 'Cause you're not dead until you get that death certificate. So, voting does that. Voting gives you an opportunity to be a part of the process and making decisions that affect you. Now if that's not important, I don't know what is. So as soon as you're old enough, you need to be running to the polls voting. Young people are notorious, I think, this last election, federal election where we elected -- well anyway…where Hillary didn't get elected, I'll put it that way, should teach us a lot about voting, that in -- this is real time—not in something that happened in the 60s. This is now that things are happening and young people were saying until Bernie came along that they didn't want to be a part of the process, that process, it was corrupt and all of this. How you gonna change it if you're not in it? You know, you can't sit over there and talk about it. You need to do something. And the only way you can, to me, that you can have any collective change is to be involved in the process. So be involved—vote.

The constant struggle for equal rights

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JOANNE BLAND:

So now you can't prevent me from voting and using that vote. What you do is put restrictions in front of me such as -- the Alabama black belt could be named for the people. It's supposedly named for the soil because it was so

fertile but the largest concentration of slaves had to be where it was fertile, right? And it's no different throughout the black belt. So what you do is you close places where I can go register at in those black belt counties. And in Alabama, the black belt counties are the poorest counties possibly in America. And where do we get money to travel to Selma from Lowndes County to register to vote when it should be a place right there in there county to do it, right? So they keep putting these obstacles in place to keep you from voting even though the Voting Rights Act says, gave us that right, period. That, well it really reinforced the Constitution because we had the right to vote, they just wouldn't let us. They put laws in place and they were in charge and that has not changed. Because now instead of making a law saying I can't vote because I don't own property or my grandfather didn't vote, dah, dah, dah, dah, making up all that crazy stuff we used to have, now they just make it hard for you to get it. Or they'll say, we're gonna be in Wilcox County today and we'll be there from nine to five. Where do they think I work at? And what hours do they I work at? Now that's supposed to help. You know, they say, "Well, we're in this county and you could come and register," but a poor person cannot afford to take off work. And if they take off they might not have a job when they get back, so who would chance that? When it should be easier to vote, they make it harder to vote. And that has not stopped at all. With the signing of the Voting Rights Act, it allowed numbers to rise and people to utilize that right. But then people started taking it away,

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like in Alabama, you know. In a lot of states, felons can't vote and they make you a felon whether you—you know, we see it everyday.

Getting the attention of the media on Bloody Sunday and the ensuing events

01:46:42:05

JOANNE BLAND:

Every war has to have a moral issue and Birmingham when they were fighting the war there for civil rights, the children were at the forefront. And people were outraged. They were like you can't do children like that no matter what color they are. You can't do children like that. And I guess it touched their moral compass. Bloody Sunday did the same, and particularly since it had—it was televised all over the world, not just the United States. People saw this. And remember we were in Vietnam fighting for to liberate a country that didn't want to be liberated but we were over there doing it like the United States always did. And people who looked like me were on the frontlines. They were dying something like nine to one, people who looked like me. And then people in this country, that brutality on that bridge and you sent my brother to 'Nam, to Vietnam, to fight for this country and people started to think. Oh, that's horrible. We can't do people like that. Not in the United States, a democratic society, we can't have that. Mothers were outraged and mothers all over the world were outraged. And whether it was pillow talk, I'm up in your face or we sitting across the table eating, we talked

about that and felt like you should do something. Breaking news to show that -- it was just that important to the news to show that violence.

01:48:35:20

And for once, that didn't parallel the…that didn't parallel today. Because they don't show the violence from that side, they show the violence from our side and forget about the people who are just over there peacefully doing what they're supposed to do. That's boring I guess, so that bridge must have been not boring. And we're glad they did because now the whole world knew what we was doing. Like remember at the beginning I told you this started like some 30 odd years ago before that and I know even longer than that. The formation of the league was 30, maybe 33 years, 32 years before that. All this had been happening in Selma; we were marching, going to jail. Who knew? Just a little snippet in a paper somewhere. Nothing spectacular. And then that. So they could not ignore that. They couldn't, and I think it changed the whole course of the movement, because now people are outraged. Not just people who look like me, justice lovers come in all colors, shapes, and sizes. And they converged on Selma to help. And not to mention, the death of two white people. And see, when Jimmy died it was just another Negro dead, right? Even thought he was killed by a law, law person, a person that was supposed to uphold the law. When James Reeb died, Johnson sent an airplane to bring his wife to Birmingham to see his body. It was all over the news, all over the world news, not national news. Just—not just national but all over the world. Because of what? The color of his skin. Now, that's not to lessen

that—anything that Reverend Reeb did. I'm thankful that he came. I'm sorry that his life was taken because of his desire to do what was right, but it took the death of that white man to get their attention. It wasn't just Bloody Sunday. It was the death of those white people who didn't have to come but they knew it was the right thing to do and they came. And then the death of a white woman—Viola Liuzzo. Mrs. Liuzzo stayed in the Jacksons home and we had adjoining apartments. And we used to follow her like ducks 'cause she always had candy. And when she died, it hurt because we knew her personally. Why would somebody shoot this woman? Where does this hate come from? She wasn't doing anything. She was just transporting marchers back from Montgomery, she gets shot. Then it's all over the news again. This white woman got shot. When Jimmy died, there was nothing. It took those deaths also, not just what—them beating Negroes on the bridge. It took the deaths of those people, those white people to cause that awareness.

The killing of James Reeb

01:52:09:14

JOANNE BLAND:

James Reeb was a Unitarian minister from Boston. Dr. King sent out a cry for justice lovers to come to Selma and help. "If you believe in justice, come to Selma." They came by the planeloads, they came. And a lot were ministers

and he along with two of his friends, Clark Olsen, who was uni—all three were Unitarian ministers, and Orloff Miller, they came to help. And that evening after marching on what is known as Turnaround Tuesday, March 9th, they ate at a restaurant on Washington Street where it was a black owned restaurant, Walkers Café. And those of us who lived in town knew that we wouldn't walk past this place in the evening time, the place up on the corner, The Silver Moon Café, because that's where the bad people congregated like the Sheriff's posse, the Sheriff. And they'd be in there drinking so—and they were mean and nasty. So if you didn't want to be harassed, you could—you'd have went the other way. You just went the long way around. But they didn't know that, and they went the shortest route. Then when they saw them, they were attacked and Reverend Reeb was hit beside the head and died two days later. Massive head injuries.

The march from Selma to Montgomery and standing up to George Wallace

01:53:45:01

JOANNE BLAND:

When we arrived in Montgomery, there was this sense of triumph, that you had really done something. That despite everything that, and all the blocks that had been put in front of us, we made it. We made it. And we showed the world that we could do it. That was the sense I felt when we got there even as a kid. And that -- the next morning we got up and walked to the capitol. And that's where George Wallace would've come but you felt such—you felt you had accomplished something. That now you're really gonna have to look at me and see me and know that I'm human just like you. And the same laws that apply to you apply to me. There are no two sets of laws anymore. That we've here—we're here now. And I'm telling you that we'll always be here. And we're gonna either have to learn to work together or we're gonna have to find a way to separate that would be fair and just for everybody. And I also felt that as a kid that things would really change. Things…because we did that walk and called attention and then we got people who came and walked with us, so you know we're right. People just, what we're fighting for is right. And then when I go back down to Selma, I'll be able to go in any store I want to go in. I'll be able to sit in restaurants that I wasn't allowed in. But as a kid, that's what I thought. But the movement was about choice. That if I want to go in that restaurant I can go in that restaurant and nobody had the right to stop me.

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If I want to go in this store and try on the clothes or shoes, nobody had the right to tell me I couldn't do that. It was about choice, having the choice to be able to do that. So I just felt like we—and I think a lot of people felt that way, this is a new phrase, that we had arrived. That we had done something so spectacular that it changed the world. When in reality we had done something so, but as we were walking, they were still thinking, those who made those laws in the beginning were thinking of ways to circumvent the ones that we were going to be able to use. And as a child I didn't think like that, but that's exactly what happened. That's why it's important that we educate our young. You have to let generations to come understand where we've been as a nation, as a nation so they won't make those same mistakes again. That they won't be the ones that think that we have arrived when there are people still hurting.

George Wallace as the face of segregation in the South

01:57:14:15

JOANNE BLAND:

'Cause at 11 years old he was our governor, he was a segregationist, he hated me, alright? People who looked like me. As an adult, he was a shrewd politician just like that mayor that we had in the 60s, that because we didn't have the right to vote, we didn't elect George Wallace. So whatever they did, whatever laws were passed were passed to assure that I stayed in my

community and that it didn't grow. And that it kept enriching those that were not in my community and didn't look like me. And George Wallace was to me the epitome of that, he's just so outspoken in that—like the day he stood in the door of the University of Alabama like it was a sacred place that we couldn't—there wasn't no Negroes were coming up in there and had to be escorted away from it. By the way, I did a speech there and they asked me not to say anything. And I'm in the building where George Wallace stood in front of and I'm from Selma Alabama, you know I talked about it for an hour. But he, he knew how to play those people who felt like him. He knew the words to say, the actions to do to keep getting elected. And even when he wasn't elected and even when he wasn't in office, somebody that carried his name was like his wife, Lurleen, was our Governor, so that those institutions stayed in place and that block that made those laws stayed in place. So do you really think Lurleen was the Governor while Wallace sat over there on the side as the first man of Alabama? No, he was the Governor of Alabama even when she was the Governor of Alabama. So Wallace was the face of segregation in Alabama. He was the face of it and the poster child. So—and the things he did and sanctioned under his administration kept us where we were and Wallace had to go. Wallace had to go but I dare say we've only had a few Governors that in my lifetime that I knew to me did help to make significant change in the—for people of color in Alabama, so…

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Ordinary people have the power to effect change

02:00:07:17

JOANNE BLAND:

No movement in this United States that advanced African Americans and people of color in the United States was not done by grassroots people. Now, Dr. King and others brought—Dr. King especially brought exactly what he was supposed to bring to every movement. When I teach the children, I teach them the three Ms. He brought motivation. No movement can be fought without motivation. People have to be motivated. He brought money. No revolution can be fought without finance. He brought the media. Without those three ingredients, even today there'll be no change because they have—they work together. Those three Ms, they work together and they affect change. But in the 60s we were empowered because the problems affected us. In the 70s, people were empowered because they problems affected them. 80s, 90s, even today the children hit the streets because those problems affect them but you cannot be quiet. You cannot be quiet. You cannot sit and wait for others to make things happen or to think that the person you voted for is gonna make this sweeping change without you saying anything or doing anything. It's a work together thing. It's not wait for you to do it. Not to mention, if you don't, if you don't tell me what I need to do, what

you want me to do that will make your life better, how the heck am I gonna know? That's why I have no problems when I vote for a person, going into their office and getting up on that desk pointing my fingers because my vote is just that important because I elected you. My vote elected you and you promised me that you would do this. And what we don't do today is realize the power that we have, particularly young people. You got all these organizing tools right at your hand. When I was growing up, we had to have flyers that were printed on a machine that did this.

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You don't even have flyers anymore, you just do this. Hit it and you could organize a million people right in one place, 'cause they could go to just that minute. Organize around an issue, put it on a table, get that think-tank together how we gonna do this and get up and do it. It's as simple as that. You have the power. You have the numbers, you know people—me standing on a mountain shouting is not gonna cause any attention to anything, but if I got you with me and you bring your best friend and you know your best friend is not really your best friend 'cause she got another best friend and then she can't go anywhere without her boyfriend. Before you know it, we got an army of people, an army. That's called organizing. All you gotta do is talk to people and we could, we have, find that common ground and that thing that bothers us the most and then we start to fight for it. And we talk to others about it. And before you know it, about 100,000 people feel the same way you do. And you didn't know it because you never talked to anybody about it. And if they

holler loud and long, 'cause you can't just hit it and quit it, you've got to be out there. If it's wrong forever, be out there until it's gone, because that's the only way you're gonna have change. As long as you got breath in your body you got power. Get up off your behind and do something. Do something. Learn where we'll be and then take us where we need to go. It's as simple as that. If we made all the changes—if the rights that we, that the young people wear so arrogantly today, and you should young people because we loved you and we fought for you because we didn't want you to have to do this…you wear it so arrogantly today were hard fought for. Nothing was given. People fought for every right that you have. So, if we can do that and have half of the tools that you have, my Lord, what can you do? You ought to be able to take us all the way this time. Make it happen. That's all…young people are so thirsty for what they…what can, what can I do? What can I—get up and do it. You know what to do. You know the problems, just get up and do it. You just don't know you know it.

02:05:21:23

Seek advice that people—I went through a movement. I could tell you the things that we did that—most of them won't work today. What we did was like a piece in the puzzle for social change. Yup. And that picture's not complete because your piece is not there. You, everybody is a piece and when that piece comes together in this beautiful picture, we've got social change and the world will be right. Young people get up and do something. If it's wrong, say something. You can't let it go because people say, "Oh, don't bring

that up." "Oh, there's nothing I can do because it doesn't affect me." "I don't think it's right but it's not in my community." You better get it out of my community before it does get into my community. That's what you need to do. So if you think it's wrong and you're looking at it on the other side of town, before you know it, it's gonna be right here and then it's too late.

How it felt to be a target of police brutality during the Selma march

02:06:31:23

JOANNE BLAND:

As a kid, I just felt so bad that someone would do me like that. That I wasn't doing anything, I was just on the bridge. In fact, I just got in the line because I love marching. I was going on a march; I didn't know that they were marching the first leg to Montgomery, which would have been about ten miles. I didn't know that. I just went on this march and then I—it was affirmed when I saw the police that we weren't going anywhere, so we weren't doing anything. We were just standing there and waiting to kneel and pray and then get up and we can't pray? And people just start beating you, and tear-gassing you and running horses over you. I never been so scared in my entire life, and I'm a kid. And I was not the, there were people there younger than me I know that didn't understand. We didn't understand that brutality. And for the longest I

had issues with white people because of that. No matter who you were, you were them who was on that bridge and you represented them. And I treated whites in a different way than I treated people of color, and I knew it myself, that I was conscious of it. That the white kid could say something and the black kid could say something; I'd eat that white kid up. I'd tear him all the way down into the ground. The black kid would do it and I'd say, "Son, don't say that again."

Nobody is born knowing how to hate

02:08:20:10

JOANNE BLAND:

You do have to learn hate. You could put children up that span the rainbow in this room right now and they'll play together. They don't hate each other. They—it's when they star to internalize our craziness, and it's not just that they become these people that aren't even themselves and they don't know it. That whatever those children have, that they'll play together, those children don't care. You can be a little green man from Mars and if—Mars, and you're their size, they're gonna play with you. They're gonna play. And that's the kind of community we need to be in. I think though that a lot of this superiority and inferiority comes from our educa—is perpetrated by our

educational system. That our children learn white European history from the day they start school until the day they get out of public schools, right. So what the people of color do in these United States? What did we do? You know, and when—how does a child be of self-worth when people who look like them didn't do a darn thing. That all the people who made any accomplishments were white people. That's an issue. That's a real issue in our grievances. And we talked about black history month when the teachers would tell you, you only did one day when you got a whole month to celebrate blackness—28 days—he shortest days in the year and then the curriculums and the way that the school system is set up does not allow you even in those lousy 28 days if you ask any—most teachers would say oh we wrote an essay. Oh no we had a program. We had an assembly where—and then that's it, you go back to that same textbook. The battle—our next battle after getting the right to vote should have been in education. That's my opinion. Should have been in education so it could be inclusive. I used to ask black children, "How many people in your history book look like you?" And they would say, "Oh, one page or two pages." And then there's some will say, "Oh we had a whole chapter," and be happy about it. Was I not here when—people of color not here when Columbus got lost and found America? People of color were here and living well without them. Taught them how to live here. Where did we go wrong at? It wasn't us, as grandma would say, "It was them."

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The need to keep fighting

02:11:27:13

JOANNE BLAND:

Nothing changes. I shouldn't say nothing changes because that defeats the purpose of a struggle. A lot changes, it's just that we had so far to go. Now what people do sometimes is once they make an accomplishment such as getting the right to vote, they feel like everything else comes with it and then they try to live in a world that's still not ready—that has no place for them, right? And that's the nostalgia. We look back and we say, "Well we're not there, we're here, and it's a good period." When in reality, you stop struggling but the people who effectively had us where we were are working against us still. That's non-stop. But we stopped working. And by the time we realize it, it's almost—it's too late. Because the laws are in place, people are enforcing those laws. It's too late because you sat back and said, "I've arrived." The struggle is real and it seems it's never ending but I know there's an end. I know there's an end. If I didn't, it would be useless to struggle. That if we make accomplishments, if we get rid of one thing and that's an accomplishment, we just got so much to get rid of so we need to be busy all the time. And I need to find me a lot of friends who don't look like me so that I can make them love me and then they'll see—they'll make sure that my babies, my grandbabies don't have to go through any of that craziness, because they're gonna be out there fighting with me, with me. Because see, I'm a lovable person and that people, when people don't—when people start

to think of me and my—and that's what the United States is taught to do, me and my.

02:13:43:01

That my father owned his own business. My father drove a cab, we were poor. We, my father, when I got out of college, I go straight into the business. What business I got to go into? I got to go into work at your business, you know? And if we don't change some of those things—it's those little things that build up to be big things. We think it's just those big things, you're stopping me from getting the right to vote. No, it goes through every part of your life. Everything that touches you, that—how can people not see that, I don't understand. Struggle is real. It's really, really real. But the good thing is that we have warriors. We have warriors out there and if we change that educational system and children start to, when, I hate that sugar coating of history. A lot of this was bad, yes. But it happened and it's truth, okay? And why would you sugarcoat any of that? I was -- Mrs. Liuzzo's daughter and I are friends, Mary. We've been friends for about 30 years, right? And Mary came to visit and she brought a—what's that magazine that be on the airplane? You know it, Sky Magazine. Okay. In there, Alabama had an ad for black history month and the ad said something like, "Dr. King came to Alabama, the people sung songs and got the right to vote." Now, I just wanted to go and tear up the world, promise to go get every one of those and just tear 'em up and have a bonfire. Why would you say that?

02:15:57:00

That's not what happened and you're always giving us a hero. Yes, Dr. King was our hero. Yeah. But I know who J.L. Chestnut was too. He was a local man. L.L. Anderson. Sam Boynton. All these men that did wonderful things. And I know Amelia Boynton, Marie Foster, Mary Lamar, Lily Davis, all these women that did all these wonderful things that our children may never know. Those people were in my pair. And helped to shape me the way I am. But you don't sugarcoat this history. It was bad and our children need to know it was bad so it will never ever happen to another people. It was—it's just by the grace of God it was me that time. Next time it could be very well you and yours because in these United States, we have this history of oppression. If I overcome that oppression, who are they gonna oppress next? Blondes maybe? People with blue eyes? Oh no, redheads, especially those with freckles, right? You don't know. So we shouldn't—they need to know that history. That's why I don't understand how they glorify the civil war. That had to be a bad time for everybody, didn't it? Death—husbands, children were dying in a war and you're glorifying in it today? No you're not. You're trying to intimidate me. It don't work like that, not anymore.

Iconography of the KKK in Selma

02:17:53:01

JOANNE BLAND:

Here in Selma when we elected our first African American mayor, an organization surfaced called the Friends of Forrest and they erected a monument to Nathan Bedford Forrest on the grounds of one of our museums. Don't worry, we said heck no but it's in the cemetery. It's in the oldest white cemetery that's here. But the—I got friends that say it shouldn't be here. It shouldn't be anywhere in Selma. And I say, "I don't have to go in that cemetery, none of my people are buried out in that area." My children don't have to see it 'cause we don't go visit anybody's grave out there. I use it as a teaching tool. The bridge itself is named after the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in Dallas County, Edmund Pettus. He was a Confederate General, he was a state senator, and he was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. And there are people here that want to change the name. Now, I'm against that. Let me tell you why I'm against that. What else does Selma have besides the Edmund Pettis Bridge, right, to draw people here? We only have tourism, right? And if you change the name of the bridge, it doesn't change hearts. In fact, it may harden hearts. Changing names and moving monuments don't—well, I shouldn't say moving 'cause I'm for moving monuments. Because I think if you want to glorify that, you should glorify that over there where I don't have to see it, but—so you need to move it. But when you rename and renew, new history begins and old history's forgotten. And this history's too important to the fabric of this nation to be forgotten, so I fight those who try to rename the bridge. And those of us who were on the bridge fight it, because we feel like when we walk across that bridge, 'ol Edmund's rolling in his grave because we beat him that time. And that if we teach our children where we've been,

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that when they walk across that bridge, they're gonna walk with confidence and Edmund's not gonna be happy because they made progress. Teach our children who they are.

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