Life Stories
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JESSE JACKSON INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES LEARNING
KING IN THE WILDERNESS COLLECTION

Jesse Jackson, Director, SCLC Operation Breadbasket
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Interviewed by: Trey Ellis
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START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents

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JESSE JACKSON:
We couldn't impose wrong on anybody. We had to in fact assert the rightness of our cause and the righteousness of our cause. And be willing to suffer and sacrifice at the end. And non violence was both a — strategy and a way of life. If we had been fighting in arms, we couldn't have battled in arms.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Learning
King in The Wilderness Collection
Jesse Jackson
Activist & Politician

First Meeting Dr. King

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INTERVIEWER:

Can we start with just telling us, how did you first meet Doctor King and what were your first impressions?

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JESSE JACKSON:

I grew up in Greenville, South Carolina and most of our people had adjusted the situation, ministers reinforced the adjustment. Be good people—don't fight for change, don't fight for power because it met with such stiff resistance. So to see Dr. King and Reverend Abernathy and Reverend Shuttlesworth emerge as redefining the role of ministers was itself a source of relief—we met them there, and we began to follow them in that vein. I was arrested June—July 1960 with several classmates trying to use a public library. Little did I know he was aware of that—and then in 63 in Greensboro, North Carolina—at North Carolina. And, we were involved in a major sit-in movement there. So—when I first met him physically I was coming to Atlanta, to speak at Morehouse, as a member of the Omega Psi Phi fraternity. And—he was coming to the airport with his group—over to get his Nobel Prize. It was just a thrill to see him. He saw me — he called my name, Jesse—it flipped me off. Hi, it's Sam—Dr. Sam Proctor, who—he knew at Boston University and they were good friends, he being—how are things going in Greensboro, how are things at the and, how are things at Bennett? So the fact that he was — cause we had been on television quite a bit during that time during the Greensboro struggle. So it made him in that sense, to me it—depicted how

sensitive he was, how aware he was of our struggle. I remember Andy Green talking about when he graduated from Little Rock Central, he was at the graduation. Not as a speaker, he was just there at the graduation. He was deeply immersed in the southern struggle to end apartheid in the south. I remember the first time I was — real close— we were in Selma.

Dr. King's Scholarship

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JESSE JACKSON:

And Reverend CT Viv and I went by—the Miss Boyd's house where he was staying. He was lying in bed, he had by him "A Low Power," by Paul Tilley, "The Courage to Be" by Paul Tilley, "The Nature of Man" by Niebuhr, and the bible. He asked me about the books, cause I was in the seminary at the time, he said, well I read one—one fiction, one nonfiction book a week. He was deeply scholarly. As I often say to young people who catch on to I have a dream dimension of his life, Dr. King finished high school at 15. He finished Morehouse at 19, he finished seminary at 22. His PHD at 26. Deeply committed to scholarship. He knew—that strong men break strong chains. I wait to hear the young people say, now when did he become radical? To be in Montgomery, Alabama, a block from the Confederate capital, and from the confederate White House, and to call a boycott to dislocate that city in the south was a very radical move.

Insights on Dr. King

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INTERVIEWER:

As you got to know him personally, what surprised you about him as a person?

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JESSE JACKSON:
His energy level. And—his reading habits. And his willingness to open up to other people. To staff members. And to let ideas flow. Whether you agree with him or disagree, suddenly we were just point blank, what do you see? His willingness to a kind of — participatory democracy. He had a point of view, he had the conclusion. But— that feature of him and his—and his preparation. He usually felt — Tuesday was kind of his off day. He'd spend Tuesday studying. Reflecting on what happened the past week and projecting. But he was quite sociable. I mean he laughed a lot with friends. What we call preacher jokes. So he was once a very personable guy. Many activists don't have much analysis. I mean analysts don't have much action. He had the combination of action and analysis and preparation. He would say, you must not have the paralysis of analysis. You can't, you can't just keep on talking, you have to act. But you act without analysis, you don't know where you're going. And if you— have— you see it but don't act, you can't get there. So he saw — the combination led to power, and that power led to change.

Dr. King's Leadership

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INTERVIEWER:
He refers to his staff as a team of wild horses. There are a lot of strong personalities there. Can you talk about that?

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JESSE JACKSON:

We would have the right to argue and take positions. And he would say two things, one we were a team of wild horses, and it was his job to take the energy and direct it and sometimes when something got hard on the inside, he would say well, we reflect in here what's out there. We cannot corral ourselves, we cannot corral the community. And so he saw that in perspective. The other thing that he would say—that he was the pilot of the plane—we were the ground crew. Without the ground crew, the plane could not go from port to port. From—from arrival to—to departure. It cannot — have mechanical dimensions. So he had an appreciation of the field crew. And he saw himself as kind of guiding those forces. And he was more like—more interested in building a kind of a tugboat as opposed to an ocean liner. He didn't want a big organization—per se. He didn't want a membership organization, he'd say you get bogged down in raising members. It was the not the big ocean liner, he wanted to have a strike force. The good to raise the issues exposed the contradictions and he had the courage to fight. And, so I remember him certainly one time that he did not want to build a big building, leave it as a monument. He didn't want to have a lot of money left. He felt if he had a lot of money left it would be a reflection on his leadership. That he was not about money, he believed that you should be materialistically minded enough to take care of basic essentials. But not mindless and materialistic enough for your—for your stuff. He had that sense of that—that's why when he won the Nobel Peace Prize, he gave the money away to all the

organizations. He kept just a portion for SCLC. Cause he had—those were kind of his—his values.

Chicago Freedom Movement

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INTERVIEWER:
How did the movement change when he moved up here to Chicago? And your role in that?

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JESSE JACKSON:
Well two things happened in Chicago, one thing happened was that the fair housing act of 68—the Chicago open housing movement, that was as concrete as—as public commendation of the right to vote for housing. The second was, rainbow push—which—Dr. King's workshop, we never stopped. Dr. King had said, this would not be a three month, six month movement like a kind of one horse small southern town. This was a big complex in Chicago. Out of Chicago came four black congressmen, three senators—African American senators. I ran for president, Barack won for president, all that stuff cause we—we helped to lead the breakup of — of the middling cost rate for the blacks in this city, and unleashed that power.

Segregation in Chicago

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INTERVIEWER:

Going back to Chicago, King talks about how surprised he was at the ferocity of the whites.

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JESSE JACKSON:
Chicago is a city of ethnic enclaves—70 or something within the city. And people fiercely guard their neighborhood turf. And various ethnic groups, European ethnic groups have certain territories. Latinos and blacks and Russians and Germans and all that. So we started marching west of Halsted. They saw us invading their territory. And they had seen blacks in the most stereotypical terms. Where we come, pain comes. And community disintegration comes. And there's a reaction to us, in the sense of people, stereotypes. And so we began to march for the right of open housing. And we would have a black and white go to—rent a house, they'd tell the black no room available, the white come right back and get the room available. So we had to break down — house by house—and then the real estate guys, what they call black-busting, once a black moved in on the block. Tell the white, and they— they jack the price. So really it was not just the — crowd throwing the rocks, which is obvious. The real estate brokers were behind that deal. And the bankers— the bankers would only lend you money to buy a house — or for business in certain areas, so the bankers had a role in this. Their hands were hid. The real estate brokers leading the block busters, so they had a role to play in this. So the kids throwing rocks, they were maybe in the 3rd or 4th layer of resistance.

Dr. King's Life in Chicago

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INTERVIEWER:

What about King when he moved in with his family to the projects?

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JESSE JACKSON:

Yeah on the—on the west side. He moved—he moved just to prove—when he moved into that apartment, it was to put the focus on the fact that you had—people had to pay rent—didn't have heat, had to pay rent, maybe didn't have running water—had to pay rent. Lead paint on the walls. I mean. And so by living in the middle of the community, it put a global focus. In other words, he had the strategic sense, to put light in dark places. And heat in cold place. And he knew that— by his — it illuminated the situation, you could say, oh man. He would say the most difficult part of the movement, when you — when you leave the— excitement of a march in Selma, where there's even violent reaction—that's not the difficult part.

Challenges of Organizing

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JESSE JACKSON:

The difficult part is that when all that's over, you got to — get people to register. And vote. The slow, —what you call the slow and non-romantic dimension, when the lights are not there. The hardcore organized convention people, to change their minds, change their situation. Cause at the end of the day, change comes when people change their minds. Most people who were on the occupation—backs against the wall—have three options. And that's

why it's so difficult to organize—as I'm understanding this. Most people are just—they have found their place, they have found their space. Where they live, where they can live—where they grocery shop. Where they go to school, where they go to church. Where they get married. They live in this circle and they have adjusted to — they — blank the outside world away. So if you're in— in the ghetto and you're paying pension funds, and the pension funds are building the other side of town, they're building the big tall buildings, you just forget that. You— you're living in conditions where you live there but you don't control the economic resources. But you've adjusted. And some people—beyond—they resent- they know better—but they don't feel empowered enough to change anything. So they have a—often become very bitter. They—they haven't adjusted—they resent. And there's the third dimension called resistance. That's where the action comes in. Where you—you become maladjusted, as Dr. King would say. And you resent—but you also begin to resist. Resisting means — some kind of boycott. Some kind of action. The weapons we use—one, the effective use of one's—vote. One's dollar. Coalition. Action. And to be morally right. Those are the weapons that you use because at the end of the day, our biggest weapon is to be mostly morally right. Ms. Parks was mostly right. Those who marched in Birmingham were mostly right. Those who marched for the right to vote were mostly morally right. We couldn't impose wrong on anybody. We had to in fact assert the rightness of our cause and the righteousness of our cause. And be willing to suffer and sacrifice at the end. And non violence was both a strategy and a way of life. If we had been fighting in arms, we couldn't have battled in arms. But then Dr. King said, if you shoot then you get shot, then there are no

winners, but if you can change without shooting and getting shot, then both can survive for another day.

Aftermath of the assassination in Chicago

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INTERVIEWER:
So you rarely talk about the assassination. You went home to Chicago right afterwards. Talk about the rioting.

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JESSE JACKSON:
I woke up the next morning—Chuck Parish was standing over me, and sent the person to come by the house. I was still putting on my clothes, went down to city hall, I was so angry. Because the same voices that were so hostile toward him, some of the ministers and political leaders, were some of the forces that said he had no place in Chicago, they were having the drapes—the purple and black drapes. And I was mad as hell. So you guys sit here as hypocrites. I was trying to control my anger for discipline, it was hard to do. And I left that afternoon and went back to Atlanta, but I came home first — but there were explosions all over the country. We were trying to turn— turn garbage into energy if you can discipline it. So our point was, don't just burn up where you live. There were some days that the steel burned out many years later. Turn your anger into votes. Turn your anger into boycotts. Turn your anger into opening school doors that are closed. Cause if you spend more than you have you get in debt, and you vote less than you have that's a form of suicide. If you spend less than you have and vote all you can, that's a

form of power. This is Chicago— this is not Selma or Birmingham or — or Atlanta, this is Chicago. And so we had to figure our way out, how to navigate through this urban situation and build— coalitions—that's why I say the weapons are — you have to have the right to vote. You have to— right use of your dollars, your coalitions, act and be mostly morally right. All that stuff has to come together to make something happen. But he—Dr. King warned us of this, he said, you'll have these movements forward, and then fear will set in and the reaction will set in. You plant two seeds in the ground of equal strength and you water them both, but you put a wall between them, one will grow tall with multiples of fruit, and one will be short and stunted. That does not mean the smaller is less than, the other is more than, it's something called photosynthesis. One that had the light could flourish. Now whites often have the light and they flourish, not because they're better, because they have photosynthesis. To put it another way, you have a wall between you, and on the other side of the wall from you there's ignorance, fear, hatred and violence. So you pull up so you can see each other, we become teammates. And on the football field, we become teammates, and in the army, we become teammates pulling for healthcare. And jobs and justice. That's all I do—that's why we choose britches over walls.

Sanitation Workers' Strike

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INTERVIEWER:
You talked about that meeting when he called you back into Memphis. Go back a little bit to like how King and as the staff reacted to the violence of the 1st March.

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JESSE JACKSON:

Dr. King said this is another case where violence does not work, because violence — serves the oxygen not the tank. The focus on how accurate or how inaccurate the rocks were, but not the focus on— garbage workers and collective bargaining. And so—but we knew that was a plan to get attention by them. And it could have been even paid provocateurs, we're not sure. But we — we took that— and so, Dr. King can't control his troops. That was not true. The ministers and the garbage workers were in lockstep with Dr. King. The rock throwers were coming from another angle. So the whole thing is putting—he can't control his troops. Fact is he, our troops were growing, and our sense of focus was growing. And— and—we went back into Memphis again determined to have another march. And that's what— the rally in Mason the night before was all about that.

Memories of Dr. King

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JESSE JACKSON:

The week before, Dr. King had been to Chicago at the Breadbasket meeting. And he'd heard Ben Bradshaw play Precious Lord on the saxophone, had never heard that before, it was a beautiful rendition. So I was coming across the courtyard and Dr. King, he's about an hour late, as he was typically. He says, Jesse, you ready to go? I said—he said, you don't even have on a tie—so I said, Dr. King, if prereq was reading, another tie is an appetite, he said, you're crazy. We laughed. And he said to Ben, Ben how you doing? And Ben said, Dr.

King, played my favorite song tonight, Precious Lord, cause he'd heard him play it two weeks before and [noise] — and then he raised up, the bullet hit him right here. It severed his tie. I heard someone, I think Bevel was saying, get low, because whoever was shooting, three bullets, could have shot several of us. And I was hit running toward the steps. And there's a picture of Andy Young and I pointing— and the pointing is that he was knocked against the wall, and the police were coming from that way with their guns. We said, the shooter came from that way, not this way, that's what that picture was all about. And I remember getting down and by the time Reverend Abernathy came out of the room, — said Martin—but he was non responsive. So I went up and called Mrs. King, cause I was living next door to them. And I called—by his bedside I had their phone. She said, hello Jesse, how are you doing? I said Mrs. King, I said, it was a long ten steps, to take from where he was to that phone, Dr. King has been shot— I think he's been shot in the shoulder, but I think you should come. I really couldn't say what I saw, it was like too much to say. Like — couldn't say that. Couldn't say that. And she said, I'll come and maybe—maybe a few minutes later, AP called to say he was dead. And that's when a new dimension of our struggle took off.

Dr. King's Legacy

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INTERVIEWER:
And what would you say finally to the people that missed that? Obviously, most people are too young to have marched in Selma to have marched in Chicago. What's the work that we need to do?

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JESSE JACKSON:

Those who live today are those who watch the Sunday football game, they miss the process from Monday to Sunday. The practice—the preparation. There is a — a new south today, and there's in many ways a new America because Dr. King—led the movement to pull down those walls. You could not have—the Carolina Panthers and the Atlanta Falcons — they couldn't have existed behind the cotton curtain. Because it would have been illegal for them to play together—stay together —sit in the fans together — in the stands together. You couldn't have had the Olympics in Atlanta behind the cotton curtain. South Carolina would not be the number one producer of tires in America today, behind the cotton curtain. You wouldn't have Honda and Nissan and Toyota in the south Behind the cotton curtain today. You couldn't have had Clemson playing Alabama—black quarterbacks in the south behind the cotton curtain. So in many ways, the whole south must attribute its growth and its removal of certain barriers — not to any southern governor—or any southerner—all that was on Dr. King's watch.

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