Life Stories
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MARY LOU FINLEY INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES LEARNING
KING IN THE WILDERNESS COLLECTION

Mary Lou Finley, Staff Member SCLC
July 14, 2017
Interviewed by: Trey Ellis
Total Running Time: 24 minutes and 20 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents

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MARY LOU FINLEY:
Justice at its best is power, correcting everything that stands against love.
That's what we need now.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Learning
King in The Wilderness Collection
Mary Lou Finley
Civil Rights Activist

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INTERVIEWER:
Just how did you become involved with the SClC, the Chicago movement, and first meeting Doctor King?

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MARY LOU FINLEY:
I came to Chicago right after I graduated from college. I came to be a volunteer on a church program in the West Side of Chicago, and I came partly because I knew that some of the civil rights leaders from the South were coming to that same parish. So I would work the first summer with the children in the neighborhood, which was a wonderful way to kind of connect with the spirit of what the issues really were. I ran a little program for girls 8 to 10 years old and one for preschool students, which really connected me with the issues that those families faced. But the first time I really met him was in the fall, in October. He came up for a big conference that we had with Chicago civil rights leaders, about 300 people. We all went up to Lake Geneva for a weekend to begin to talk about how to organize the movement in Chicago collaboratively between Doctor King and the Chicago folks. He made a very inspiring speech, kind of making it really clear that he was very connected to the issues of poverty in Chicago and wanted to do something seriously about that. So I found him to be powerfully inspiring, well educated, and he knew what was going on in Chicago, even though it was really new for him.

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INTERVIEWER:

Did you have an impression of him when you first met him personally?

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MARY LOU FINLEY:
He was a very sweet, warm person, very cordial, very inviting, and he was very, very supportive of the people who were on the staff. You know, I think that we felt like we were doing his work. We were working with him, and I think he really felt that, too. He felt we were with him and that he cared about us and wanted to help us do the kind of work that we needed to do.

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INTERVIEWER:
Could you just talk about what the effect of segregation was?

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MARY LOU FINLEY:
Well, the thing that was most obvious when I began to work here was the issue of housing. African-Americans were trapped in particular communities and unable to move outside of those without there being serious threats. There had been a number of people had tried, and there'd been very difficulty in the years before preceding the movement. So it was also a period when there was a strong, immigration coming up from the south, a strong movement of people coming up from the south, due to the changes in the southern cotton fields, in particularly in Mississippi, there were a lot of people from Mississippi that came to Chicago in the 1950s. The housing conditions became very, very crowded. People, the landlords would take one

and four room apartments and break it down into four different one room apartments with four families in there. They didn't take care of the buildings. And so the buildings were very dilapidated and falling apart. There were a number of fires that happened in these buildings. I remember looking at windows where I was living on the near West Side and seeing these fires, buildings on fire. So housing conditions were really abominable. And that was one of the ways, that....that was one of the ways that de facto segregation really manifested itself in Chicago was the housing segregation and the consequences of housing segregation were not just that, Black people couldn't move or they wanted to move, but in fact, the places that were available, many of them were very, very bad condition. Now, there were nice and Black middle class neighborhoods as well. But there were many, many people who were forced to live in these very poor conditions. So that's one kind of important way that the de facto segregation manifested itself in Chicago.

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INTERVIEWER: Is there still de facto segregation in Chicago?

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MARY LOU FINLEY:
Today, de facto segregation in Chicago? Well, it's not as bad as it was. There are more opportunities for African-Americans to move into other neighborhoods. There are laws. And so that if that something doesn't work, people can be their landlords and can be sued. The landlords or the real estate agents can be sued if they refuse to show housing to

African-Americans in certain neighborhoods. So it's not as tight as it used to be. There's still some segregation. So I'm not going to say this program, this problem is fixed. It's not really fixed, but it's not as extreme as it was. One of the things that happened, kind of paralleling the Chicago freedom movement, was the case to desegregate public housing. And that's a long story in itself. But one of the outcomes of it was the decision to allow people to move to what they called opportunity neighborhoods with public housing money. And so there were many families. The organization that grew out of the Chicago freedom movement, The Leadership Council for Metropolitan Open Communities, ran a program for many, many years where they moved thousands of people to better neighborhoods that we're not saying that we're integrated neighborhoods. So there were many more opportunities for moving out of the most difficult neighborhoods than there had been before. I'll put it that way.

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INTERVIEWER:
Can you talk about Doctor King's decision to move to the slums and you know, your experience?

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MARY LOU FINLEY:
The story about Doctor King's movement to Lawndale involves...I was involved in that, but also a young woman named Diana Smith, who also worked in the office with me, who was from Lawndale. And so when it came time for her to find an apartment for Doctor King, Diana went out with one of

Doctor King's associates, Bernard Lee, to look for the apartment. And Diana knew the neighborhood, so she knew how to find the kind of place that she thought Doctor King was talking about, which was one that was really the kind of had the same kind of problems that other people in the neighborhood had to live with. So they got an apartment. And then one morning we worked on furnishing the apartment for Doctor King and really, the church we worked for had a second hand store, so we got things moved in from the secondhand store. We did buy new beds. I remember buying the beds from Sears and Roebuck. Andy Young said it was okay to buy new beds. And so we did that. Everything else was secondhand. Diana and I were going to go over there one morning, from where we were staying at Project House on the near West Side. We were going to go over there and clean it up because it was quite a mess. And so Diana went over first, and then she called me back at the project house where we were living, and she said, forget about the mops and buckets. You can just come on over here anyway. So I took the bus over and we found out that the landlord had found out that Martin Luther King was moving into this apartment, and he had sent a crew of ten people in there to paint the whole thing and to put new linoleum on the floor and kind of clean the whole place up. So at least we didn't have to do that. As I say, there was stories going around in those days saying, well, all we have to do to clean up the whole West Side is move Martin Luther King from one apartment to the next. These landlords know what to do. They just aren't willing to put in the energy unless there's something special like Martin Luther King moving in. So finally, he and Andrew Young spent the first night there one night in January, and Diana and I had equipped this apartment with blankets and dishes from the project house, a group house that we were living in as sort of student

volunteers. And so I got worried. It was a very cold night, and I got really worried that there weren't going to be enough blankets. And so I called up Andrew Young and said, do you think you have enough blankets? Would you like me to bring some more blankets over? And he said, yes, you could bring some more blankets. And he said, furthermore, he said Doctor King would really like some barbecued ribs. He said, Doctor King likes ribs when he's starting a movement. So we went and picked up those, picked up some ribs, got the blankets and went over to see Doctor King in his apartment. We sat down on the floor eating. I don't...we had some furniture. There was a big couch that Doctor King sat on, but I don't remember any other furniture, actually, in the living room. I remember sitting on the floor and as we were sitting there, having our dinner together, the four of us, the doorbell rang, and it turned out that there was, we opened the door and there was a young man there who was... who wanted to come in. So Doctor King said, come on in. So this young man said, the first thing he said when he came in the door was, are you really Martin Luther King? Doctor King thought that was pretty funny. And he assured him that he was, in fact, Martin Luther King. And they had a very lovely kind of conversation, with Doctor King really saying, we want you to join the movement. And so finally, the young man left, and pretty soon later there was another knock on the door. We opened the door again, and here was the same young man, but there was like a whole train of them going down the stairs. And so they all, we invited them all and Dr. [King] said, invited them all in. And the same young man, he came back and said, he said, well, I went back and told my buddies that Martin Luther King had moved in here, but nobody believed me. So everybody else wanted to come and see you too. So we had a wonderful conversation as Doctor King was really wanting

again to get them interested in the movement. And it wasn't a very long conversation, but it was a very sweet moment and I just felt it was amazing that I happened to be there when this actually happened.

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INTERVIEWER:
There's a lot more that goes to nonviolent direct action than that. So can you talk a little bit about what else you guys were doing in planning?

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MARY LOU FINLEY:
Besides, part of what we were doing was, first of all, this is just beginning to understand what was going on in the neighborhood and what we ended up, coming up with an analysis that talked about slums as an exploited community. And, one of the young people who we were working with from the neighborhood, what we were trying to say, well, what is a slum? She said it's a community where all the resources go out and nothing comes back in. And we were thinking about that, like the rent that people paid. You know, the landlords mostly were absentee landlords. They didn't live in the neighborhood, whatever that rent money was, went somewhere else that wasn't poured back into the buildings. It wasn't poured back into the stores in the neighborhood. And so that was an important form of analysis that we came up with. There was a huge problem with peeling paint, which in those days the paint had lea d in it. And because the lead based paint had a sort of sweet taste to them, a lot of the children, the small children, the little kind of toddlers would eat these paint chips that fell off the wall, and that was

causing enormous problems with lead poisoning among children. It was not just uncomfortable, it was really a dangerous situation for families. So going on a rent strike until the landlord fixed the building was an important thing. Now, that was kind of scary for people, but we managed to get a lot of people to agree to do this. At one point we had like 45 buildings on rent strike with one landlord, who owned buildings on the west side. In one of these buildings, there was a two year old child, and there was a broken railing on the back porch. This child fell off of the porch and died. And that was really a stunning moment for all of us. And we all know what two year olds are like. You know, two year olds are wonderful, adorable. They have a lot of energy and no good sense. So, you know, that's kind of the children that are going to be real vulnerable in that kind of situation. And so because of that, we actually found where this particular landlord lived out in, a nearby suburb. And we picketed his house on a Sunday afternoon with about 25 or 30 of us. And it was quite a startling moment because the landlord hadn't told his family that he was...what he—where he was making all his money. And his children were quite upset when they realized that, that the conditions of the buildings that he was making his money off of, and none of his neighbors were also upset. So it began to also put another kind of pressure on him. So there were some times when a strategy of a small march could be useful in the tenant union movement. But mostly we use the rent strike as a strategy there.

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INTERVIEWER:

Was there talk about education or unemployment as another pillar of some strategies to address.

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MARY LOU FINLEY:
Well, the Chicago movement, led by the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations starting around 1963. So it was really a kind of a couple of years, two and a half years before Doctor King came to Chicago, was really focused on the school situation and what was happening in the schools with the schools for African-Americans were becoming very crowded because, again, there were so many people moving into these neighborhoods, often from the south. And what was happening is the schools, most in the Black schools were on double shifts. So the children were going to school for half a day, you know, like from seven in the morning until noon and then noon until four something. So they were not getting a full day's education. Meanwhile, often a few blocks away from some of those schools were white schools, schools with white students with empty classrooms. And so some of the parents said, well, why can't we send our children over to those schools that have plenty of room instead of having our children on double shifts? This doesn't make any sense. Well, the school district wasn't going to go for that. And so it was really that that movement grew out of that whole segregated school situation. That's another example, by the way, of the, de facto segregation, in the North. And that that was a very strong movement. At one point there were they had a school, boycott where over I think it was one was 275,000 children were out, one 400,000 children were out for a day. And the people in the community organized freedom schools for the children to go

talk about Black history or some other kinds of things that they weren't getting in school. So the children, there was a place for them to go, but it was a making a very strong statement that that many parents in Chicago understood this problem and wanted to do something about it. So that was a very powerful moment in the Chicago, civil rights movement overall. And in a sense, I think that's one of the kind of things that would inspired Doctor King to come to Chicago, because he saw that the people of Chicago were ready, you know, they're ready to do things, and that really—you want to be working with a community that's ready to be on the move. And Chicago had shown that they really were.

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INTERVIEWER:
When this summer of '66, it seems the world is, you know, everything's changing. The Black Power, anti-war. The Chicago movement. Can you describe what it was like to live through the summer of '66?

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MARY LOU FINLEY:
Well, that summer of '66 did feel like a very turbulent time. I feel like we were teetering on optimism and pessimism. On the one hand, we were going to do this movement in Chicago. We were going to try to end housing segregation in Chicago. We understood that nonviolence had a lot of power, and that we ought to be able to make some difference with that. So that was there was that kind of optimistic sense, really, that grew out of the power of the movement in the South that we could make a difference. On the other hand,

sometimes the conditions in Chicago seemed overwhelming. There were so many people. There were so many problems. And how are we going to be able to make a dent in all of that? So I would say there was a kind of back and forth sort of teetering between a deep optimism and a deep pessimism around how do we cope with this situation. And I would say in the middle of all that was the rising of the Vietnam War. People had elected Lyndon Johnson in 1964, thinking he wouldn't escalate the war as much as Barry Goldwater would have. Yet he was escalating the war. There was a draft, so that meant young men had to deal with whether or not they were going to be able to be drafted and go into the war. So that was an issue everywhere. Every family, every young person was dealing with what they were going to do about that. So that was also a very distressing time in that way. So we felt the war, we didn't want the war to go on, but we didn't know how to stop it either. And Lyndon Johnson just seemed to be barreling forward with all of that. So even though he had been a supporter of civil rights, and that in that sense, was somebody whom we could and he did some other things. I mean, he started Medicare and Medicaid and the War on poverty, and he did some things for ordinary people that made a huge difference. On the other hand, why was he pushing this war in Vietnam so you couldn't decide where he stood and where you should stand in relationship to him? So in that sense, it was also very confusing, to figure out what was going on. And what are we...what can we do about all of this? The forces against the Vietnam War were not very strong at that point. There were a few lone voices. It wasn't clear that that process could be stopped. And in the end, it was not stopped. It went forward. And many deaths later and many much devastation of Vietnam later. It was a challenging time to be young. And I also have the sense that it

was disillusioning in the sense that....all of those people in power that we had some respect for were falling off their pedestals, one after the other. You know, that was an experience as being a young person. Then we thought that they were intelligent people who knew how to do sensible things, and then they weren't doing them. And so it's like, wait a minute, who can we trust? Who can we trust to run the country in a way that really is a humane commitment, in a way that's humane and that's committed to justice for all people. Who can we trust to do that? We thought Lyndon Johnson was kind of would come along. He was kind of slow, but he did, in fact, come along. But then he wasn't going to do that around Vietnam, so who could be trusted? So it was, a lot of young people became very disillusioned. And I just kind of backed off for a while and trying to think...figure out, well, what are we going to how to make sense out of this whole thing? So it was a very turbulent time. And of course, then 68, with all of the tragedies that had brought, including the tragedy to Martin Luther King, was utterly devastating. It was a set us back for a long way, a long time. In terms of people really being able to feel that we could change the country in a way where...that it would reflect the values of justice and a humane caring for all the people. We're still working on that question.

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INTERVIEWER:
You talked about King's death. Do you remember where you were and how it affected you personally?

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MARY LOU FINLEY:

After a year in the movement, I...I went back to graduate school and switched off my field from history to sociology, because I thought maybe sociology is more useful in understanding what was going on in the city. And I was able to go to the University of Chicago. So I stayed in the city. So I was a graduate student of the University of Chicago in 1968. I still remember very vividly when my old friend from the movement, Claudia King, called me up to tell me that Doctor King had been assassinated. And we were all just stunned at that moment, like the whole country was stunned. It was unbelievable. He had given so much, he had given so much, and he cared so much about ordinary people. That was what I loved about him. We know his eloquent speeches and that was wonderful, but it was his heart that he really cared about what happened to the children who were hungry and the children who didn't have the health care they needed. And how are we going to make this a just and world for them? And to have that caring sort of removed from us so dramatically was just really, devastatingly painful. And I have to say that the assassination of Robert Kennedy two months later was just another incredible blow it made that year. Unbelievable, because Robert Kennedy had also been a voice for the poor. He was really interested in poverty and hunger, and he had political power within the political structure, and he cared about those kinds of issues. And that he was also struck down during that same spring. It's unthinkable. It's just unthinkable, the whole thing. So, I feel like the country is still recovering from that in a sense, and that those voices from that time are still really important to us. We're in a time now, and commitment to making sure that everybody has an opportunity to have a decent life, has the food and shelter and health care they need. We're having a

hard time as a country making a commitment to that. We're not really there, although the voices calling for that are getting louder. So that makes me hopeful. We're not there yet. So I really feel like there's a lot of Doctor King's work that got started in those last few years that is still needed. We really are with the work we're doing now, kind of wanting to say it's time. It's time to recommit to the work that he started in those last years and to finally create the kind of just society that he was calling us to.

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INTERVIEWER:
What does Doctor King have to tell us today?

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MARY LOU FINLEY:
Doctor King spoke about justice. He spoke about what it meant to have justice for ordinary people. And a sense of justice for ordinary people comes out of caring about ordinary people, even those who are struggling and sometimes make mistakes. Like we all do. But what we really need to be able to do now is to commit ourselves to the kind of principles that he stood for, which is that children who are hungry need to be fed. We need to take care of the sick children in our society. When you take care of sick adults, we need to take care of people. We need to, as a society, commit to everyone having a decent life. And we need to organize our society to figure out how to do that. Those are the kind of things, the unfinished work of Doctor King that he began back in that time. And I think that we need to revive his language for talking about all of those things. We can go back to his work as a source of inspiration and

as a way to see what it is we need to do now, because those problems have in some sense gotten worse. You know, we have to figure out how to create an economic environment that will provide the opportunities so that everyone can have a decent life. That was the last of his work, and that's the work that still remains. And one of the things I love it, one of the quotations from Doctor King that I like about all of this is this. And I'm going to read this to you. "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love." And I love this. And I feel like justice, that kind of justice needs to come out of love power, correcting justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. That's what we need now.

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