

LESSON 2 HANDOUT

Young Leaders of New Orleans—Oral History Transcripts

Dodie Smith-Simmons

Smith-Simmons was interviewed by Mark Cave at the Williams Research Center in New Orleans on August 21, 2017, for the NOLA Resistance oral history project. Below is an excerpt from their 96-minute interview.

CAVE: Talk about the training that you went through to be a member of CORE?

SMITH-SIMMONS: Well, we had to listen to talks about non-violent direct action. We had to listen to them talk about Gandhi. We had to go to the library and get books on Gandhi. We had to do a fast at St. Aug School in the middle of the winter on their—I guess playground. We couldn't talk, we couldn't eat. This was the way of learning discipline. Then we had social dramas where some of the CORE members would be the "sit-in-ers" and the others would be the perpetrators. We were slapped, we were thrown off the chair and we were called names. And those kinds of techniques.

My mother didn't think I should join. Because when Dorothy told her what they had to do, my mom says to me, "The first time somebody look at you wrong, they got a fight on their hand," but I learned to overcome that. I'm non-violent to this day. I not only use it as a technique; I use it as a way of life.

Claude Reese

Reese was interviewed by Mark Cave at his home in New Orleans on October 12, 2017, for the NOLA Resistance oral history project. Below is an excerpt from their 123-minute interview.

I learned how to spell the word solidarity in elementary school or middle school, I'll bet you. I learned what it really means from Oretha because—don't ask me dates because I don't know that I remember any. But when the students across the nation finally found the means—the means to resist what we had been subjected to forever and ever, it was mainly black students from the black schools across the country. And so, when I went back to school in the spring of '61, I met Oretha. She recruited me to the local CORE chapter, and I became a part of the energy and the effort of the local cha—the students at CORE. Well, things started to happen with students at the flagship school in Scotlandville, at Southern in Scotlandville. And so, we were going to school every day. And, boy, I mean the kids at Southern, our sister school in Scotlandville, were getting worn out [laughs] by the authorities at Baton Rouge, in Scotlandville. Day in and day out. I mean we were getting the word that these kids were suspended. These kids were arrested. This happened in downtown, in Baton Rouge. And one day, Oretha had me and another person—Don Hubbard is the other person, he lives in New Orleans. In her kitchen. And she said, "Oh, no. This has got to stop. We can't keep—we can't continue to keep going to school and doing what we've always done at school. Going to school, having a pretty normal school day when our fellow students on the main campus are being—are committed to the struggle being beaten, suspended, jailed. And we can't just keep going to school like none of this is happening." And so, she said, "No. This has got to stop." And so, she

probably was the leader in the conversation after that about how we thought we needed to act like—well, those of us down here at Southern in New Orleans understood the solidarity. We kind of act out in solidarity with our fellow students. And what we hatched in Oretha's parents' kitchen at 917 North Tonti Street—what we called our “freedom house” for a long time. Still call it that now.

But, anyway, we decided to do a rally at—on campus. Went to school the next day, the plan was to do a rally at noon, at lunchtime. And remember, Southern University in New Orleans at that time was a grand total of one building. [laughs] This was 1961, the fall of—the spring of '61. Yeah. So, Don and I got the assignment to do the rally. Yeah. Don wasn't in school. He just came and met me at lunch time. We got upon the hood of a car and started making noise and starting speech making. I think Don was more able at that than I was. And so, I think he made the bigger difference. And we got stu—more and more kids coming to the car where we were standing—where we were standing on the hood. And so, the rally went through—a few kids, some more and more. And we said, “Okay. Good. Well, that went so well.”

And so we decided, well, why don't we just do a march around campus? So we started that. And when we started the march around the campus, the president of the student body kind of got touched a little, apparently, by it. So, he got in the march. And he was president of the student body, so we were just quote “rabble rousers.” [laughs] Although I was in school there. Don wasn't. We kind of said, “Okay. Good. Why don't you take over?” And so, he led the march. Well, that went so well. And so we said, “Wait a minute. I think we ought to think about taking this energy and this action downtown in the city to—let's do a prayer vigil at City Hall.” Well, as it turns out—as it turned—as it was, Don's daddy was in the bus transportation business. And so, we had to call his

daddy to ask—have his daddy—ask his daddy—have his daddy to meet us at Dillard University because we decided that we would do the march from SUNO’s campus all the way to Dillard. We did. We went on Dillard’s campus, picked up some Dillard students, and then boarded the buses. The buses took us to Saint James Church on Roman between Canal and Iberville where we stopped at the church consistent with the plan to kind of get the students we had—who were not everyday activists kid—young people, mind you. And so, we thought we’d better give them a little bit of an orientation to what was happening now.

David Dennis

Dennis was interviewed by Mark Cave at Dillard University in New Orleans on September 27, 2017, for the NOLA Resistance oral history project. Below is an excerpt from their 60-minute interview.

CORE is now planning a Freedom Ride. And so Jerome Smith and them supposed to be on that first bus and everything, and so I’m—at this time, I’m a little bit into [where more?] of the movement is. But I’m still chasing Doris, I’ve been to jail now, you know. [laughing]

CAVE: [laughing]

DENNIS: Didn’t do any good. But at the same time, where the house is—her house is like a meetings place, you know, so her mother worked at Dooky Chase. So they used to have all this good food. So I’m in college, school, so I was over there almost every evening, chasing Doris, chasing food, [laughing] listening to stories and stuff. And so then you have the Freedom Ride piece is. So we’re there in—I’m in the buses attacked in Anniston, Alabama. So everybody’s gathering at Doris’s

and Oretha's houses, they have to do something about this. And so Rudy Lombard, everybody—and so the, I mean this is horrific. So I'm seeing it on TV, so I am getting angry, I'm upset about it. So there is this conversation going on with Oretha is on the phone with the Kennedys, and everybody, Jim Farmer and them is, we've got the [Contain Meets Rise?], and the court wanted to stop them, and Oretha and them was saying "No." And then you had in the other end in Tennessee, in Nashville, you had Diane Nash and them saying "no." But Oretha was just as much involved as Diane Nash, she just never got the credit for it, you know, to keep those rides going. So the idea was that, we go send—the CORE is going to send some people from [laughing] New Orleans up to the things. And so, Jerome and them were saying, well, we've got to get some people—"Dave, you've got to go. We need you to go." I'm like, "Uh, man, look, I'm trying to get out of school," you know. I'm trapped here, and Doris is looking at me staring, she says, "I'm going to go!" and everything, looking at me. And I say "Nah." You know, my manhood is being challenged. [laughing]

So we don't—I got an excuse not to go, because everybody—people who were beaten in Anniston, Alabama, and in Birmingham couldn't get medical care. So now we have to figure out what to do in New Orleans piece is. So I'm involved now to a large extent. And so we had a friend, Goodrich, was a black hospital, and he had black doctors here, so we were able to get them down here, and Rudy made arrangements for them to stay at Xavier University. Norman Francis was there, I think the dean of men. And we got him in there, and so then the idea was, OK, it was just rush, rush, everybody, we got to go. We got to go. And so we end up—I ended up volunteering to, reluctantly, you know, to follow Doris again. [laughing]

So there were five of us, Doris, and the Thompson sisters. Jerome Smith, Julia [Umbles?], and myself, five of us. So we take a train to Montgomery, Alabama, to join in. So we get there, things are heated up and riots are going on, we have is. And I get off the bus, we go to I think it was Dr. Harris's house, is where we stayed at. And so everybody was there, and so we—they're talking about whether to continue to ride. And the ride [inaudible] the next day. So you've got Martin Luther King, you got Abernathy, you got all the great ones. All the leaders—every other civil rights organization is there, plus the people like [Doubles?], Diane Nash, and all these people, gathered in this room. [Well the big goal is?] the young people, [saying we can go?]. So I'm really caught in the middle here, because I'm not sure yet. You know, I'm really not sure yet. I'm like, why am I here? I'm really beginning to question myself is, you know this is crazy. This is crazy. You've got a mob outside this house here; they're talking about going down to get on a bus that you know you're going to die on. [laughing] [You know this is not to be] this crazy.

So this is where my life turned. This is my turning point in my life, [where I see?], was trying—in the middle of this question is, somebody in that room said loud and clear: "There's not enough space in this room for both God and fear. Make your choice." It was all over. And so from that day on, it was like—it was like a boom, flash of lightning. You know, so I'd never questioned what I did is, and I had these moments of fear at times is, but it wasn't the type that... You can't ever say you weren't afraid in what you did, but you didn't have—fear or paralysis you might say that caused you not to do things. It was like a whole different ball game. So, you know, being in the places, you didn't think about it anymore. So we got up that next morning, went on down and we

had to go through a mob to get on the bus. We had no way of knowing what the government—that Kennedy decided he had enough; he was going to make this bus go safely.

So we were actually under arrest when we left Montgomery, because when they got us on that bus, it was totally surrounded with National Guard—on the bus, top of the bus, side of the bus. [laughing] And so the bus made one stop, you know, we couldn't—[only?] stop to go the bathroom, all the way from Montgomery, Alabama, stopped at the Mississippi-Alabama line, and changed guards, all right, National Guard. Straight to the bus station in Jackson, Mississippi—that was when we got out the bus, there was a line of police on each side. So you had no way to go but all straight to the white—waiting room is, and the cops were there to—chief of police was there is, and he said “You are now under arrest, go this way,” and they kept you walking straight onto a paddy wagon! [laughing] So actually, we were under arrest when we left Montgomery. From [the federal?], to the state, to local police department.

So that was my baptism, getting involved into the civil rights movement. So when I got out, I dropped out of Dillard University is, and I went and did some fundraising with CORE, to help raise money to train people to go to continue the rides.