

INTRODUCTION TO NOLA RESISTANCE

Grades 6–12

LESSON 2: Young Leaders of New Orleans

David Dennis Oral History Transcript

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.