

INTRODUCTION TO NOLA RESISTANCE

Grades 6–12

LESSON 2: Young Leaders of New Orleans

Claude Reese Oral History Transcript

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.

REESE: 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.