James Forman

My names is James Forman, I’m 73 years old. My current occupation is I’m a retired senior citizen, and I’m president of the Unemployment Poverty Action Committee which is a social action organization, non-governmental and not for profit. I’m also the publisher of a news service called the Black America News Service which is distributed to people throughout the world and the United States of America. I’m also an author, I’ve written seven books.

I grew up in the city of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois. I also grew up partially in the state of Mississippi. When my grandparents lived in the state of Mississippi I would come down and visit them. I live in Washington, D.C. now. I’ve been living there for the last twenty years. And I’m living there because we made a decision inside the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee when I was executive director that we attempt to get the right to vote for everybody throughout the southern states as well as in the District of Columbia. We had accomplished that objective in terms of states outside the District of Columbia, but people in the District of Columbia can now vote, but the people they elect cannot vote in House and in the Senate, and we are attempting to work on that.

I’m not a Freedom Rider in the actual sense of some of the other people here are Freedom Riders. I was working in Fayette county, which is an adjacent county to the state of Mississippi doing voter registration work. And I was doing that work before the Freedom Rides was organized. And in the process of doing that work, I began to meet a lot of the Freedom Riders, and came over to Jackson for the Freedom Riders trials. Here in Jackson we discussed the Freedom Rides, and we discussed Robert F. Williams who lived in Monroe, North Carolina who was eager to have some of the Freedom Riders to come to Monroe, NC and I was instrumental in helping some of them, calling him and get his permission. So the Freedom Riders in Monroe, NC and myself, some other people involved in demonstrations there. On November 1, 1961 when the Interstate Commerce Commission order was to go into effect, as the executive director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, we organized demonstrations, or sit-ins, or a group of people to go down to the Trailways bus station to see that the order desegregating the buses was going to be complied with. Consequently we were arrested because even though the order had been issued by the Interstate Commerce Commission to end segregation of interstate travel....also I was very instrumental in helping organize the delegation in Albany, Georgia to test the Interstate Commerce Commission order that all segregation was to be eliminated on November 1, 1961. We were arrested in Albany, Georgia.

I was very involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and I was very involved in promoting the Freedom Rides, in breaking down segregation in interstate transportation.

My relatives basically come from the state of Mississippi. My grandfather lived here, and I would come back and forth from Chicago to Mississippi at various times. I grew up acutely aware of segregation and the question was how to do something about it. Acutely aware of various lynchings that were taken place— the assembly of white man and women and children to view the lynching of a black person. And we though those things had to be changed. So the question of becoming a civil rights organizer flows from understanding theoretically what
needed to be done in building a mass movement, where people get the right to vote and so people in the South can break down Jim Crow law.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee became involved in the Freedom Rides after it was announced that CORE was discontinuing the Freedom Rides. People in SNCC and its affiliated organizations attempted to carry on that particular ride. Lucretia Collins was one of those students; we had similar views that the Freedom Ride had to go forward even if they would be killed. So I wasn’t involved initially but I was involved later on in the logistical support for the Freedom Riders.

The Interstate Commerce Commission gave the decree that interstate segregation throughout the United States as of November 1, 1961 would be illegal, so we were testing that. When we got to Albany, Georgia we were arrested by the police force. A lot of other people were arrested after, that—that’s how the mass movement got started in Albany, Georgia. That’s how we viewed the Freedom Rides, being a catalyst for other avenues.

Q: Were you ever scared?

A: No, and I advocated that if people shouldn’t participate in these things if they were frightened. People, as Lucretia Collins points out in my book, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, people felt that a tremendous amount was at stake and that the Freedom Rides should continue even if it cost our lives. But in terms of myself, and the Civil Rights Movement, I was born in Chicago, Oct. 4, 1928. Both of my parents were from Mississippi, so I would come back and forth to Mississippi on a segregated train, experiencing the very hardships that were experienced by my grandparents who lived in Marshall County, Mississippi, and their children. So consequently, all these accumulated experiences compelled me to try and do something about it.

I’ve dedicated my life to this type of work and I have no regrets with respect to that. We encountered a lot of violence in Monroe, North Carolina. One person came at my genital parts with a knife, and another person yelling “I’ll kill you, you niggers,” to a whole crowd of people. So, yeah I’ve suffered a lot. But hopefully those days are over and the younger generations are not falling in those traps, of calling people names.

I’ve been arrested a lot of times in the Civil Rights Movement. I was involved in the logistical work of trying to get the Freedom Riders to Jackson, and after the burning of the buses in Anniston, we tried to rally as much as we could to ensure safe passage of the Freedom Riders. But I have been arrested many times, and I was arrested in Albany, Georgia as a Freedom Rider when we were testing the decision whether or not it see if it was applicable and we found out in certain areas that it was not, including Albany, Georgia. We proved that concretely.

In Monroe, North Carolina we were arrested. I was put in jail and a date was set for our trial. At the trial, we had a trial, a lawyer named Nick Holt and William Kunstler. I kept passing information to them suggesting that they transfer the cases out of the lower courts, this was a point of highest importance, and we had a right to do what we were doing, picketing at the courthouse in Monroe, NC. But the lawyers never did that, but later on Bill Kunstler made a statement in the news that I had suggested to them, or tried to issue an order saying that it was an
illegal restraining order, because what we were doing was legal. He said: “Jim Forman was right, that we should transfer these cases to federal court,” but they were being thrown out because they had a constitutional right to march outside the courthouse. But the police in Jackson, Mississippi and other areas at that time didn’t agree with that, and that’s why there were so many arrests. But when they agreed to finally issue that order, it was finally possible for people to travel on the interstate buses, and get off and not be frightened, not be fearful of someone putting them under arrest. This was highlighted by the fact that when some of the Freedom Riders and I stopped in a gas station, I went in the gas station to use the urinal bowl and a man came in with a pistol “Cut it off, cut it off right now.”

When I say that the question is of highest importance, it is because people have a constitutional right to protest, a constitutional right to pass out a leaflet. In Jackson, Mississippi in 1961, 1962, if we were caught on a corner passing out a leaflet, we would be arrested. And similar things have occurred to me in other parts of the country.

Racism is very rampant today, and it’s very painful to have to live in a society where there is racism.

I was executive director of SNCC; I was elected to that position in the fall of 1961. We started to organize voter registration, operation MOM—Move on Mississippi. We set out to McComb, Mississippi with about 49 students.

The Freedom Riders were arrested in Jackson, Mississippi and the arrests signaled to the rest of the country, even though there were only 350 people, that something was very, very seriously wrong. The fact that the people didn’t have the right to vote, like they should have the right to vote. Operation MOM—our response to the injustice in the state of Mississippi. The integral components were the voter registration campaign. Here in Jackson, Mississippi, we exercised our constitutional rights to hand out a leaflet. That led to a Freedom Vote, the Mississippi Summer Project, and it led to other things including President Lyndon B. Johnson calling Allan Dulles, the former head of the CIA to come out of retirement to come to Mississippi to find out what he could do to help the Mississippi Project. Our position to him was, and I got the last word on this, was that the best thing Lyndon B. Johnson could do was to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and not to let anyone filibuster that bill so that it could not be passed. Filibustering bills had been a tactic for the past 30, 40 years. States in the South were so adamantly opposed to the success of the African-American people they would filibuster the bills so that they would not come up for a vote. Fortunately, the Civil Rights Act was passed, and I’m sure that President Johnson worked to make sure that was possible, and I am eternally grateful to him for helping to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act, for sending Alan Dulles into the state. Our view was if you want to help the people of Mississippi, and the country itself.

There were certain inadequacies in the bill that it was necessary to open up more campaigns in Mississippi and Alabama which led to the 1965 Voting Rights law, different from the 1964 Civil Rights Act. It abolished segregation in the United States of America, without any implementation. Unfortunately people have been murdered, there have been over 10,000 lynchings in the United States since the Civil War. There is a KKK unfortunately. Hopefully the people in Mississippi
and all parts, the South, the North, the East, the West will rise up and eliminate this kind of scourge, this kind of reality in our lives. We shouldn’t have to live in fear of the Klan, but 10,000 black people have been lynched in this country since the Emancipation Proclamation. And for the young people, we hope that they won’t have to grow up and feel this way. Hopefully, people, young and old will know the questions of needing to have slavery, putting people into servitude. It’s wrong.

The Freedom Riders made a tremendous contribution because they were not just going to jail for themselves, they were going to jail to help people in the United States and in every country in this world, regardless, without exception. Segregation in interstate travel was wrong. Even today, in Afghanistan were there’s a war going on, in Pakistan. The Freedom Riders were fighting so that these people, if they come to the United States, would not have to sit in the back of the bus. Everyone should pay tribute to the Freedom Riders, and I’m serious about this. Because people were very courageous and willing to face the mobs, and the burning of the buses in Anniston, to make this country a better country for everybody, and people all around the world have benefited from this work.

It has enriched my life, I have no regret whatsoever. I try to accept that role [leadership] with as much humility as possible and a lot of gratitude to the people for entrusting me with certain leadership roles, and I’m very happy about that. We keep stressing that we are trying to build a better world for everybody, for people of all groups, all nationalities. It’s a very enjoyable thing but fraught with a lot of trouble in a sense that have to convince a lot of people.

I have two children. One’s a public defender and one’s an actor. My children were born after the Freedom Rides, after the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act. Keep in mind what we were doing was for the benefit of every white person in this country and the state of Mississippi, every black person in this country and the state of Mississippi and for people all over the world who are benefiting from those kinds of struggles. My children were affected, but in a very positive manner, but that doesn’t mean that there weren’t problems that they faced. I recall very vividly in my memory, a white woman with three or four children in a field saying “Please do not forget us, we cannot pass these tests.” What we were doing was not just for black people, but for everybody.

I think that Mississippi has changed. I think the current governor, the current mayor of the city have made it possible to have dramatic change in the state. I think it’s important that some people are still trying to hold on to the symbols of the Confederacy, saying “This is our lives.” And we’re trying to get people to come out of that mode, and the governor is one of those people trying to get people to come out of that kind of thinking. Hopefully we will not revert to Civil War practices—keep in mind that the Ku Klux Klan was formed by ex-Confederate generals. It’s wrong for people to keep preaching hatred, and hopefully we can help people to overcome that. That gets to a point I want to make about the 1890 Constitutional Convention. It was designed to take away the right to vote from the black population, and the poor white people in the state of Mississippi and to block them having relationships with the Populist movement which spreading across the South, in Georgia, Alabama and other areas.
Progress was made because people were willing to sacrifice, like Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner, and the Freedom Riders. But we live in a better world, a better state, and hopefully it will get better and better.