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Interviewer: Sophia Neeson and Connor Scanlon (Rhodes 2017)

Interviewee: Stuart Mitchell

Videographer: Suzanne Bonefas

Collection: Stuart Mitchel Scrapbook

Neeson: On behalf of Crossroads to Freedom, Rhodes College and the Wither's Collection and Gallery, thank you for coming and sharing your story with us today. Today's date is

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August 13, 2015 and I'm Sophia Neeson, a senior at Rhodes College and I'm honored to meet you and to learn from your inspirational story. Today's interview will be archived online at the Crossroads to Freedom website. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. This interview will focus on Stuart Mitchell and his experiences supporting civil rights work in Tennessee. In 1965, Stuart Mitchell joined the students and faculty from Cornell University as they worked with local communities in Fayette, Tipton and Haywood counties to register voters, educate local populations and support equitable education for African-American populations there. Okay, can you please state your full name again for the camera?

Mitchell: Stuart Mitchell.

Neeson: And if you don't mind telling me, what year were you born?

Mitchell: I was born in 1944, actually Valentine's Day. I'm a Valentine's

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baby.

Neeson: Where were you born in Richmond city?

Mitchell: I was actually born in Virginia in Norfolk, my dad was in the army. I was raised in Upstate New York on a little dairy farm in a little town called Middlesex, New York, about 40 miles South of Rochester.

Neeson: What is your occupation now?

Mitchell: Today, I am the president and CEO of a community development organization known as Passtone Corporation.

Neeson: Who were your parents?

Mitchell: My parents, now deceased were Stuart and *Elena* Mitchell.

Neeson: What were their occupations?

Mitchell: My mother was a manager of our local school's cafeteria, and my father owned and managed an insurance agency.

Neeson: Can you describe a little bit of what they were like?

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Mitchell: They were amazing people. They were parents who were very engaged in the raising of their four boys. We were all boys, and we grew up on a farm, although my parents weren't engaged in the farm. They, I think, were committed to the idea of raising us as wholesome and as healthy young men as they could possibly do. They were engaged in all of our sports activities, all of our church activities. Anything that they did, they were always present and fully tuned in to what it was that we were doing, and that carried down through just my life as living with them, but they were that way with all of my brothers as well.

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Just amazing. And I think on top of that they were engaged as volunteers in their community. They were always engaged in some activity of service to the community of Middlesex, to the area in which we lived and worked, through the church, through this historical society that my father was very involved with, through the organization that provided food for people. So they were active in the community and were known as community leaders, and I think that's partly where I got my community organizing and leadership skills, watching and being a part of their life as they worked very actively in the community.

Scanlon: So uh you mentioned volunteering, religion, and sports. Is there anything else you think that your parents gave you that contributed to you growing up as a wholesome young man.

Mitchell: Um, yeah. I think both

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my parents had very strong convictions about right and wrong, and they were very clear about helping us understand that the difference between, you know, being engaged in the community and I think they paid close attention to the ways in which we behaved ourselves in the community that we lived. We're in a small school and it was a small town, and when people talk about being raised by the village, we are that example because everything that happened in our life was known by somebody and that somebody always knew our parents, so we would always be engaged in

that opportunity to be a part of the community, but also knowing that they were watching us almost all the time. Not that we were

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perfect kids, that's not even trying to suggest that in any way, but more that we were in a small town, a rural town, and that experience of growing up that way in kind of a simple life was a big part of the way in which they taught us the basic values of life.

Neeson: Um, can you tell us more about your brothers, who they were and what they did.

Mitchell: My brother George was 11 months younger than I am and he was a giant. He was almost 7 foot tall when he finally reached his full height, but he was big almost from the time he as born. And we called him the gentle giant. And he was. He was just a very peaceful, balanced, centered person who

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brought just this sense of stability to all. Everything to do is about, he was just very mellow, very laidback. He of course was expected to play basketball and he did. And he was eventually recruited to play basketball for University of Virginia. *I don't want you to know* how long that happened, but a long story he went down and discovered he was just too homesick and wasn't really able to stay with it so he came back and finally he ended up working with my father in the insurance agency and eventually bought the business between my other brother and he bought the business from my father. He died in a tragic tractor accident in 1993, which conduced Dave to be a serious

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problem in our family, a serious issue for our family that he was such an anchor for us that I think we've kind of been unanchored ever since in some ways, but we have great memories of his work with us, his great fun that he had. He was also a huge volunteer in the community. Ran they ambulance core and worked very actively in community projects all the time. Dale was three years younger than I am, and he was also tall, and also played basketball, as did I. And was very active in all kinds of sports. Ended up being athletic director, graduated from college, and played basketball in college, I should point that out, and then he also ended up going into business with my father and together, when my father retired, they bought

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my brothers George and Dale bought the business. And he is today doing really well down in Austin, Texas. My brother Paul is the youngest of us and he also played basketball, and we kind of watched him grow up after the rest of us were kind of out of the house, and he eventually ended up being very interested in photography and

went to school in California for photography, then came back and kind of helped around the farm and did some odd jobs. Ended up being a nurse and he's now a nurse practitioner in the town in which we grew up so he's lived there and worked there most of his life.

Neeson: Okay, this parts about some of your time growing up. What sort of activities

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were you involved in?

Mitchell: Growing up, working on the farm was a big part of what I did. I was very active on the small dairy farm, it was dairy and sheep and chickens and pigs. So I was very attached to my uncle and I spent a lot of time being mentored by him and working on the farm and just having that experience of going to school and working on the farm, I was pretty committed to being a part of the farm operation. I also played basketball and got involved in some activities outside of the school. I was involved in the leadership of our class as we went through our high school years. So I would say I was active in church, a very small church. So I would say I was primarily

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farming and doing the usual high school kinds of things and being pretty active with my friends and those kinds of things.

Scanlon: Okay, and if you don't mind me asking at this point, what sort of activities did you see yourself going on to do during college and post-college?

Mitchell: Yes, I went to Cornell with the idea that Cornell is a land grant college and they have a school of agriculture that my idea was to come back and be a part of the farm. I had a choice, and the choices that I was exploring was either go back on the farm and become part of the farm operation that are more, you know, fulltime basis. Or my father really wanted me to go to work with him in the insurance agency and begin to become a part of the insurance business. And I was really in my junior

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year in college, really trying to contemplate what would be the better choice and my dad had paid for me to take an insurance brokers course while I was at Cornell with the idea that I could begin to understand what it would mean to be in the insurance agency. I was going to work for him the summer between my junior and senior year, and that's when the Fayette County, or the West Tennessee project came into my life.

[mumbling]

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Neeson: Okay, what was primary school like for you?

Mitchell: That's a long time ago. I think I was probably pretty normal student in primary school as well as high school. I was not a scholar by any stretch, but I made it through. That was my goal. I got into Cornell, not that I could get into Cornell today, but in 1962. Actually, Cornell had a two year program, which is kind of related to this story, that I was accepted into. And it was a two year *Ag* program,

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and the idea was that if I did well on my first semester, I could be immediately promoted from the two year into the four year program. So that was a major goal for me to do that, and I did. So I ended up by the second semester my first year being accepted into the baccalaureate program, which was a big change in my kind of understanding of academics at that point as well. I began to realize the value and importance of scholarship and of reading and actually learning about what it is that you're doing. I think I had through high school- I mean I did well. It wasn't that I struggled with the sciences, but I didn't think of myself as a student and I don't think I thought of myself as-

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probably more in the activities side of life and academics as a necessary thing you needed to get through. And I began to get exposed to some professors who were engaging in areas that I began to become interested in and I think I began to see the value of actually learning and using that knowledge to improve and help me understand better where I fit into the world. I think that becoming aware of the idea of learning began to happen for me in my first/second year at Cornell.

Scanlon: So, what were some of these areas that you talk about the professors sort of brought you into, I'm sure it had to do with activism in some way, but could you name some-

Mitchell: Yeah. One of the classes was I took

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a required rural sociology program or course, and the professor was doing a project where he was- he wasn't organizing people, but he was trying to understand the rural poverty in the Southern tier of New York state which is really considered part of Appalachia and is a very poor area of New York state. I got involved with him in going to some of the community meetings that he was attending. I think he was trying to develop like a strategic plan or organizing a group of people to think about what would be the ways in which they could improve their community. So I was a student connected to that project, and I remember I had a very wealthy Aunt and Uncle who lived in Olean, which was a part of the Appalachian

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counties, but they owned a tile company and they did well. Anyway, we went to a small rural town right near Olean and we stopped to see my aunt and she was very interested in what I was doing and was very interested in meeting the professor and we ended up having dinner with them and I think I actually articulated for the first time this idea that there are people who are really struggling to make ends meet and that I was trying to help understand that through the work that this professor had invited me to do. So I think that was probably one of the places I started to think about the haves and the have nots. I think Middlesex where I grew up was much more the have nots and it was part of life. I didn't

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feel out of place. We were certainly better off than lots of people, but none of were by any stretch middle class or wealthy in the sense of financially wealthy. Very wealthy I think in terms of our lifestyle and our culture and the ways in which we viewed the world, but it wasn't around money. So yeah, I think that professor and rural sociology introduced me to something that I had not thought about being very adventurous or even an idea that was out there. But that led to focusing much more on rural sociology, and that led to I think maybe being more tuned into ideas that began to enter into my life as I got into my junior year at Cornell as well.

Scanlon: So if that's

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what got you interested in civil rights, could you tell us a little better about like the specific instances that have led you to decide to come to West Tennessee, and like the people who were involved in getting you down here?

Mitchell: Yeah, that's a very interesting story. By my junior year, put it that way, I had been involved in a fraternity and I had actually been the president of the fraternity and our fraternity was like probably most fraternities, pretty party oriented and spent a lot of time on recreational activities. There was not really a sense of community investment or community involvement that lots of fraternities have today. It was really a place to live and a social club, and I found myself I guess getting tired of that and I moved out of the fraternity

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and I just looked for a room outside the fraternity and found an attic in a house that was owned by a family from New York City who had bought the house for his son just as a way of, well 1) I think they could afford it, and 2) it was an interesting way of having an asset by the time the son was through school and they were resourceful enough to do that so his name was Bob Keel, and he rented out rooms in addition to having room for himself, and I rented this attic and in that house, renting another

room, was this person Burt Whise who was from New York City and was an intellectual in every sense of the word, and was very engaging as a person. He and I became friends,

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and as it turns out, he had been down to Tennessee in 1964 for a project that we're talking about. And the part that I actually cannot really get my arms around was that he convinced me that I should check this out and he convinced me to go and so I've always been struck by the fact that someone who is as opposite as me- New York city, intellectual, and activist in every sense. He was a radical, he was involved in STS, student protests on campus. He was in very way a person that was just not like me. We got to be friends and I invited him to the farm and it was just like going to a foreign country for him, to visit Middlesex.

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Out of that, I trusted him enough to explore this idea, but I honestly fifty years later I can't point to some specific event that said you really need to go to West Tennessee on a civil rights project in 1965. Unless I bring it to full circle which maybe we'll talk about later is that I do believe that for me personally it was God sending me a very strong message.

Neeson: What was your first impression when you arrived in Tennessee?

Mitchell: Yeah, so wow. So the way this worked is that there were a group of students. We came down together and the organization that was headed by Professor Douglas *Dowd* had bought cars

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for us to travel with and to use while we're down here. So I traveled with three or four people whose names I can't even remember anymore, but it took a couple of days and I remember we stayed at some professor's house at least one night, of a college some place on the way from Ithaca down to Fayette County. And then we got down here and we were assigned a geographic area to work, it was a district in Fayette County. We were immediately housed in a sharecropper's house that the project paid the sharecropper's family some money to rent a room to us. So I was in one that was literally a shack from anything I had experienced. It did not have running water, it was basically an open shack

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with one room that was obviously the parent's room and there was two or three kids. They gave me that room and they slept some place else in the shack. So I had the best room in the house and they fed us breakfast. So I'm going from Ithaca, Cornell, life, living like most students were living to this incredibly different world

all of a sudden, and just literally waking up the next morning realizing that I was just in a completely different place than I had ever been in my entire life. Fortunately, I was with Judy Miller, who had been down the summer before and she was staying in a house I think about five miles from where I was staying, and I was on her team so I felt some security in the sense that Judy knew what she was doing and had done

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this before and we immediately started meeting as a group to prepare for what we called we're going to be teachers in a freedom school concept basically to teach families about the importance of voting, importance of voter education and voter registration. So I think we discussed [inaudible], but the first impression was waking up in this shack on a dirt road with sharecroppers who absolutely just opened their doors to us. They were friendly, warm, inviting. Their kids were great and all of a sudden I'm in the midst of a completely new world for me. So it was a culture shock, would be a simple way of saying it.

Neeson: What county did you live in?

Mitchell: So initially we lived in Fayette County, and

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Fayette County was then, and I think unfortunately it still is, it was the fourth poorest county in the country at that time, and it was interesting that Professor *Dowd,* part of his work with us was giving us kind of a lecture almost every day on what was going on around kind of the politics of segregation, the politics of how to present the idea that if you registered to vote and you vote for people who care about your issues, that you can actually make change. That idea for people who had been essentially locked out of the political process for their entire experience for generations and generations was not an easy concept to communicate to people. In addition to the fact that the whites were incredibly intimidating and did everything in their power

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to prevent people from registering to vote, and that was a very brutal and violent and kind of a terrorist kind of environment in which we were working trying to bring a very complicated concept to people. So Doug Dowd kind of helped us frame that in kind of an intellectual process as well as tactically trying to talk about how it is that you would go about in these conversations with people, convincing them that they should take the risk to register to vote. So we were in Fayette County and we were following a very historic and civil rights event called tent city, and I wasn't around for tent city, but that tent city was a symbol and a reality for hundreds of families who registered to vote between 1960 and 1965

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when I was down there, they were actually thrown off their farms, they were as sharecroppers literally thrown out of their livelihood and they ended up putting together a tent city of several hundred families and three different sites, and that certainly was the backdrop for any organizing effort to try and convince people that they should try to really break the system. So initially I was in Fayette County, working with Judy and visiting families and working in the freedom school and trying to help people grasp the idea that they should go register to vote and actually driving them to register to vote.

Unkown: So did you see any of these terrorism acts you called, on the first hand keeping people from registering to vote and then as you say these sort of punishments after they had become known registered voters, getting kicked off their land.

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So did you see any of that first hand and what sort of tactics that you mentioned that you used- tactics that the freedom school employed to sort of convince people to undergo this sort of traumatizing event of registering to vote.

Mitchell: Yeah, I'm not really clear about what I experienced around the- what I remember is that the people who were in charge, and remember I was a twenty-one year old student coming down. I was not in a leadership role of any kind. I was assigned to work, in this case with Judy, to do this job of trying to convince people and working in the freedom school. But, from our trainings what I would venture to understand from all this is that we were told never to go out at night, never to go out by yourself, always make sure that you're staying close to

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The environment in which you're supposed to be working, and then there were stories of other of our workers getting beaten up, getting chased off the road, getting harassed by local white people as they were trying to run the organization. So I don't remember personally until I got up into Covington, and I know we're going to get to that in a minute. In Fayette County I don't really remember personally experiencing any confrontation with the white people or with the KKK or anything like that, although that was all there. I think I was kind of isolated from that for my relatively short time there.

Neeson: You've explained that you started out in Fayette County and then you moved on to another area. What work were you doing in this

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other county? What county was that and how did that change come?

Mitchell: Yeah, so I think what happened was, and I'm not exactly sure the timing, but I think we arrived in Fayette County in the middle of May of 1965. I've not gone back to try and pin down exact dates, but it was the middle of May. It was right after school was out and we left immediately. I don't think I shared the story of my having to tell my father and mother that I was not coming back for the summer to be on the farm or to work in the insurance business, just to regress backwards a bit, I decided mistakenly that I would tell my father. We met halfway between Ithaca and Middlesex and I told my dad that I was doing this

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and of course he was very concerned and very upset and didn't think it was a very good idea- didn't think it was a good idea at all. Yet, did not tell me I couldn't do it. So that moved to the next stage where my mother was absolutely devastated that I didn't invite her to hear the story at the same time as I told my dad and she was crushed by that. I think she was more upset about the fact that I didn't include her in that conversation initially than she was by the fact that I was doing what I was doing. My grandparents were very active in our life as well, they were very much engaged in everything that we did, and they were I would say traditional segregationists from an upstate New York perspective. Their

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idea of who black people were was very consistent with probably 99% of the people there, although we had no black people in our area. So the idea of integrating anything between races was contrary to their understanding of the way life should be. They couldn't imagine why we'd be interested in- why I'd be interested in- trying to integrate anything or to be in any way engaged in civil rights work for black people. So there was family pressure at that point to not make this decision, but I did but I kind of told you how I got there. But to the move from Fayette County, we moved to a town called Covington, Tennessee.

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The reason we moved there is that the western Tennessee voters project expanded in 1965 into four counties. Originally it was just in Fayette County and it expanded into four counties. Again, I wasn't part of the decision making process, but I think they asked Judy to go and be a part of this project to integrate a segregated school system. Because I was on her team, I went with her. That's what I think happened, but again I wasn't in any leadership role. We went to Covington, Tennessee to work with an organization core congress of racial equality, led by a minister from Memphis- Reverend James Smith. Our entire work shifted from the freedom school

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to basically organizing. So we started as part of a group of Cornell students and a group of local, mostly young African-Americans in providing a team of people to begin to do several things, but mostly to say integrate- we wanted to integrate public facilities, we wanted to integrate the, I think- well the facilities that we integrated was a restaurant called Sandwich Shop which ended up getting us arrested and put into jail for a couple days. We were organizing an integration of two movie theaters in Covington, but most importantly we were organizing a boycott of a school system that was set up so the black kids could go school in the summer and be off

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in the fall to pick cotton. It was basically the labor source for the cotton industry, which was huge in this whole region. Our job was to convince the parents and the children to boycott the summer session and force the school district to deal with the fact that that session was ending and they'd have to be integrated into the regular school system in September. At that time, the schools were completely segregated and the white schools were passing down used books to the blacks, to the kids in the black school. It was totally separate and unequal in every way it could be described. I think it was a tremendous amount of pent up effort and energy by the local black community that this was the thing to do. I think Reverend Smith was very

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effective and very charismatic and able to convince enough people to get behind this movement and it just began to grow and grow and grow. We were successful and we actually shut down the school system for the summer and I think about 85% percent of the students did not go to school in the summer. We ended up organizing a 1,000 person march that was the largest march they'd ever seen in that area. We drove a caravan of families to Nashville to protest the treatment of black students to the Nashville department of education and it turned out to be a very big transitional moment for education in that community. So it was there

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That we did experience some of the violence and some of the terrorism that the black families also experienced. So it was a very difficult, dangerous time. We had a cross burned in front of our house. I think there was a lot of effort to figure out how to divide the black community so that there would be fewer people supporting the boycott and trying to drive a wedge between the leadership and the black community. And again, I was not a part of that process, but knowing that the NAACP was trying to *form* the project and also trying to figure out how to work by racially and some way to try and appease the white community that this could be done in a more gradual kind of way of course. But the families that

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stood up to it and said no, it really shut down the system. I don't know exactly what happened in the fall, but I know that they ended up being integrated into the white schools. I don't know exactly how that took place, I went back to Cornell so I didn't really see the results of that, but there was a legitimate, real change in the education process because of the boycott and the strong coalescing of the families to support each other and to take the risk that included losing their jobs, that included being kicked out of their house if they were a tenant, it included all kinds of intimidation that they were facing from the white community as they stood up to their rights.

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Scanlon: Could you tell us anything about the response of the local community, both to your appearance to help them segregate the schools and like the cross burning in your yard or any other sorts of, again like terrorist acts that other anti-integrationists would perform upon you volunteers.

Mitchell: Again, it's an interesting arena to think about, and one of the areas that I've always wondered about, but what was the impact of having white students from the North coming down as freedom riders or as part of a project that was working in the South that was supposed to be indigenous to the civil rights movement and what impact did that really make. Was it more beneficial

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To me as a white person, a young person getting this experience, or did it really make a difference? And I think the answer is probably both. I certainly was not perceived as a leader although there were some people in our organization that were clearly leaders in the effort with the leadership of the black community to try and decide what tactics to use, what decisions to make about what to organize and I think there was a good deal of that, but I remember Douglas Dowd really pushing the idea that this was not our project. That we are there to be part of a project being led by the local people. I believe we did that, I think we followed their direction. I certainly didn't and I don't think Judy did, felt like we were instructing Reverend Smith in any way. It was the opposite way around. He was asking us to do what he wanted us to do and we did what he

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wanted us to do, but when we would go to black churches and we would tell the story of the importance of equal rights, the importance of being able to get the same education as white people- when we said that, and we got many, many opportunities. Every Sunday we would be in four or five, six churches talking and we'd always be invited to tell our story. Every church we went to, so there was a real sense of respect and of interest and curiosity about white people speaking in a black church, and especially white people from out of town and didn't have the experience that they had with white people growing up. So I could see how that idea could go to

somebody's head and think that 'Oh my God, I have this great power, I'm white, I can come down and convince all these people to do these things, that wasn't what was happening, but there was

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something about the idea that white people witnessing whiteness in a way that was positive and meant something about being, you know, connected to each other and having a similar commitment to correcting or to changing a segregated system that had been so exploitive and so incredibly oppressive to so many people for so many generations that they treated us very, very nicely and with great respect and I think that probably did make some difference in the way in which people felt like it was time to take this on. But we were also right in the midst of the national civil rights movement that was happening and Dr. King was certainly very active, not in our area, but we were part of the whole movement and that we were one little project,

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but the civil rights movement was huge and it was really moving across a country. I think people in the local communities of black people had decided that it was time to stand up. That this was going to be now or never, and they did. Yeah, it has transformed my life, but it might have been valuable in some small way to demonstrate that white people can be part of a change, can be part of creating opportunity, can be a part of ways in which people could envision a new way of life and that I was honored to be a part of that.