

Marc Oliver (with Richard Morrisroe : Gloria House)
Sullivan's House

Testing test test,

O: Yeh, look on the back, on the back of that, 1,2,3,1,2,3

O: We shall (laughing).....

S: We're going to have some singing tonight too.

O: Are we, good

S: Yeh, some people from the music department are going to help.

L: Everything's a go so you might as well start

S:okay

L: Go ahead Bill

S. Okay, does GLoria want to come in.....we're going to try and make this informal too so just jump in, you might have some questions to ask Marc that might be more pertinent than I have, so, well we're just going to try and get initially how you all got involved in the Alabama project. So if you could give us ah, a background.

O: Okay, I'm Marc Oliver, I'm now ah, 45, living in Sun Valley but the time we're talking about, ah, 1965, I was a sophomore at Mason Jr. College in San Diego and I'd been following the civil rights movement. I was a history/political science major with a lot of interest and um, when I saw the events of ah, on Pettis Bridge in Selma I was, like a lot of ua, angered when I saw Jim Clark and the Dallas County sheriffs ride into that march. Martin Luther King went on television and asked people of good will that it was time to, to put up, come walk the walk and I decided I wanted to be a part of that. I come from a family of activists. My mother, Mary Eunice Oliver, was on the board of the Episcopla Society for Cultural and Racial Unity. We'd been active in things in our area, political things and church and racial things. So I said I wanted to go and I'd represent our family there ah, I ah, joined a whole group of southern californians, 2 planes loads left 3 days later from Los Angeles ah, Fred Fitton, a lot of ESCRU people from San Diego and Los Angeles. We flew into Montgomery and participated in the last day of that Selma to Montgomery march, the walk into George Wallace's capitol ah, Jon Daniels attended that. Lots of folks that ended up in the south tha summer attended that ah, something happened in me, I just felt that I neede to be more a part of that. So I um, I asked John Morris, the executive director of ESCRU if there was something I could do that summer when school was over and he told me yes, that ESCRU was going to have a presence in Selma and that I could participate in that.

S: So you left after the march and went back to,

O: I went back and finished school ah, spoke about the march in southern California. I was ah, the ah, director for young democrats in 2 California counties and I spoke at political events and at schools. Um, I attended a race relations institute at Fiske University when school was over and then I was given the name by John Morris um, I was given the address of the George Washington Carver homes ah, a phone number abd the name Jonathan Daniels, and that's what,

S: What month was that?

O: That was July, 1965

S: Judith Upham was already gone?

O: Judith Upham was gone, ah, I didn't ever hear of her name, in fact, until Jon told me about her, that they had gone on the march together. I didn't know anything about Jon at that time. He was just my contact person.

S: And you lived with a family like Jon did?

O: Yes ah, Jon had arranged for me to stay with the Bell family which was across the court from the West family he stayed with ah, wonderful family. A father in the home, a working father. I didn't realize until later the jeopardy I was putting his family and him in. I didn't realize what it meant to put a person like me out there. the danger it could cause his children or his employment. But I never was discovered and he never lost his job.

S: Jon had to move, our records indicate, from one family because ah, house because their job was put into jeopardy.

O: Sure ahha, if you were lucky enough to have a job and you were discovered, something was going to happen, or one of your kids could be beat up or something.

S: And so, what were you doing down there, were you working with Jon on different projects?

O: Yeh, we had ah, we had 2 or 3 different emphasis initially um, there was a section in Selma out by the dump that was surrounded by ah, some real impoverish acts and the water system was the drainage out of the dump and everyone was continually sick and one of our, our plans was to get some of these people some welfare benefits and also try and get some of these children taken to the ah, clinic run by Dr, Dumont and Ann Mobley which was a white physician from New York and her nurse. And also have the city do something about the water. They had the water tested and it was just terrible and was the cause of most of the illness out there along with the diet, the other thing was a um, liason, we were trying to, to bridge the 2 communities ah, Jon credentials and his abilities ah, gave a lot of credibility to us and able to speak with the white citizens council ah, a local judge ah, the county, city and county welfare, ah, groups like that we were trying because, you know, this was a community in transition. We tried to be a liason between those 2. And then the ah, the third thing was ah, a continuing presence at St. Pauls episcopla church which was segregated and ah, we were continually trying to ah, keep that issue in the fore front and we went there every Sunday. Gloria went with us on a couple of occassions and there's all kinds of stories about what happened there and I'll take up with you later but um, we also were doing some ah, we had a vehicle, Jon had that little red VW, dangerous car, and we did a lot of transportation of SNCC students in and out of Lowndes County and several other counties too.

S: How did you first get involved with SNCC by the way?

O: Um, Jon had um, already made some contacts with some SNCC workers, particularly ah, Eugene Prichard in Selma and Ruby Sales and through them, you know, at night there was a gathering at a place called the Chicken Shack. At night we would go there quite often and SNCC workers from outlying

counties would be there and ah, we'd sit there and eat, have a few beers, talk philosophy, a lot of interesting new thinking was going on there and ah, in that social format we met a lot of ah, the SNCC workers from outlying counties and particularly Stokely Carmichael, who Jon had already met and we were working with ah, the students who were out in those counties were having difficulty. They weren't eating very well and what they did eat ah, was so ah, different from the diet that they were used to that they were getting sick. So we would bring them in and they would go to the Holiday Inn and sit in air conditioning for a few hours and eat some meals and rest up before they went back out there. That was reall tough duty out there in those counties and ah, the SNCC young people, the SNCC students from ah, the black southern colleges mostly were carrying the heavy load out there, a very heavy load. It was very dangerous out there.

S: Were you working within Lowndes County at this time or just primarily transporting people?

O: Our policy was ah, and this was, everyone agreed to this, Ruby, Stokely, Jon and ah, I wasn't a policy maker at that time, I was 19 years old. I was more of the ah, front line trooper and driver ah, but the policy was that Lowndes County was not ready for white workers, it was not ready for demonstrations ah, very, the lowest possible profile. There was voter registration, a very quiet level going on and there was coop work going on out there. We ah, we only went to Lowndes County in the daytime once and we'd go out there at night to shuttle workers back and forth and ah, to visit Sheriff Stokely who was living in a tiny little shack, terrifying rural road, you know, just at the mercy of whoever and whatever out there ah, I would have been scared to death to be where Stokely was living. I wasn't comfortable where I was living but ah, it was the boonies and the people out there were ah, much more defiant and militant, the white people. It was a county that was 89-90% black and ah, the thought of integration was just intolerable to them.

S: How did you and particularly Jon, get along with ah, SNCC works ideologically?

O: Well that's an intersting question ah, we were all on the same team but we weren't exactly going in the same direction. It was um, within the SNCC movement and amongst some of the workers, there was the growing black nationalism. We were working for integration and some of them were working for separation ah, the works of Malcolm X were being discussed ah, militancy, ah and I tell you, the longer I was there the more I started to agree with them. The thought of integrating with these people in the south didn't seem that appealing to me either um, but those were the growing root of black activism and militancy that were happening among the SNCC young people in those days and that was the first time I had run across that. And it was interesting, there were fascinating philisophical and political conversations going on,

S: About those kinds of issues?

O: Tjhose kinds of things and ah, I mean, I heard Jon and Stokely going back and forth as comrades and friends but not

always going in the same direction.

S: What would Daniels emphasize?

O: Well, Jon was a believer in non-violence ah, the militancy was starting to question that philosophy that was the philosophy of maybe the older black leadership of the SCLC. There was a lot of frustration with SCLC in those days and ah, they were just questioning ah, those established tenants of the civil rights movement. So there was, we had vigorous arguments but um....we did feel we were all on the same team and we supported each other but there were differences beginning to grow.

S: What was your impression of Jonathan?

O: Well, I had never, I had really never met anyone quite like him um, I didn't have any preconceptions because all I had was a name and a phone number but um, for a 19 year old westerner, um, I had never met a person, other than a few friends of my parents, older people, I had never really met a young person that was living out their philosophies. I had never met a young person that prayed on a daily basis and had such a foundation in, in their religion and theology ah, I hadn't made those kinds of philosophical decisions. you know, I was really more of a front line worker than a philosopher and a thinker ah, um,.....Jon ah, had a lot of courage. He had courage in a way that I didn't. He had ah, he wasn't afraid to confront on a regular basis. I ah, I had my doubts about when to confront and ah, how to do it and ah, I was scared for my own personal safety. Jon didn't seem to have any regard for his personal safety ah, he took chances, I felt and ah, maybe....one of the things I might have helped him with was that I might have held him back here or there when it got a little too dangerous ah, he was ah, I would even say to the point of sometimes being reckless.

S: Any examples of that?

O: Pardon me?

S: Any particular examples of that?

O: Yeh, one night we were at the Chicken Shack and there were a couple of SNCC students that needed to get to a place called Greensborough. It's funny, I had a 98 year old grandmother in a rest home there and they said, now this isn't going to be easy because the, we've taken over the church there and it's all barricaded and the police have barricades around it and we're sleeping in there and um, I don't know if you can get us in there but we need a ride back out there. So I started to come up with reasons why that wasn't such a good idea at one in the morning to drive out there and Jon said "let's go" I said, "Jon, are you sure you want to drive out there tonight?" and he said, "Yeh, let's get these young people out there." So of we went in the little red VW, you know, into the cracker country and ah, sure enough the place was barricaded. Jon ran the barricade in the car, drove right up to the front of the church and we all got out of the car and ran into the church and everyone was asleep in the church, sleeping in the pews and ah, we stayed for awhile and we jumped back in the car, ran the barricade out of there and drove back to Selma. Ah, you know, that wouldn't have been my idea of the right thing to do but Jon just was, he was just ah, ready.

I mean he....he was always more than willing and ah, I was more cautious, you know, that's why when I got my letter after I'd left and was in New York, I got a letter from Jon saying that he was doing kore work in Lowndes County with Stokely ah, my heart sank a little bit because I knew what a dangerous place bloody Lowndes was.

S: So you left at what time? What period did you, you didn't participate in the Fort Deposit thing did you?

O: No, um, that happened ah, I think the second week, Richard, the second week of ah, August. I'd been gone for a couple of weeks.

S: Ahha, so you left early August, yeh,

O: If I'd have been there, I mean, jon would have probably talked me into it but I wouldn't haave been interested in a demonstration in Fort Deposit in Lowndes County, you know, that, there's no telling what that could lead to. That was a definitely a change in the philosophy ah, policy of what was happening while I was there.

S: BEcause up to this point it was a very low profile.

O: The lowest profile, and really no profile by us and lowest profile by the SNCC students out there. To my knowledge, that was the first demonstration of any kind to ever be attempted. Looking back on it it might have been still a good policy.

L: What about the Candan's, was that before or after the Fort Deposit?

S: Oh it was before but that's not in Lowndes County, that's in a different county. Um, which also, that was the one with tear gas, so that was no picnic either I guess. I think that's in Marion County isn't it? Um, do you people have any questions or, that you'd like to bring up with Mark.

GH: Were you thinking of going into the priesthood?

O: Ah, no. I never considered that ah, I was ah,I think that priesthood's too confining for my personality.

GH: I was just wondering if that's why you were directed to Lowdes county.

O: My ah, my motivation was ah, as an American, I couldn't stand the idea that an American could be treated like this and I must admit I have some self interest. If a black American can be treated like that, any American can be treated like that and ah, that's the lesson of WW2. If you don't help your brother when he's getting it, look out, it could be you next. I must admit, when I got back to California and took a good look at San Diego, it was a totally segregated city, but ah, my eyes weren't opened until I traveled. I wouldn't have been able to see and we went to work on San Diego.

RM: Marc, did I hear you say that your grandmother was in Greensborough.

O: Yes, ahha

RM: So a part of your family was from that part of Alabama?

O: Both of my parents are southerners.

RM: But from central Alabama, the Black Belt?

O: Ah, my father's from South Carolina, my mother's from Texas. My father's....excuse my mother's grandmother just happened to be in a rest home there. I never saw her. I was only in that town for maybe that hour that night.

RM: And it wasn't a very opportune time to visit her even if you cared to.

O: It was a very opportune time. That was one of the scariest ah, nights of my stay in the south.

S: Do you remember when you heard about Daniel's death?

O: Yes I do ah,.....I had ah, worked at the World's Fair for a couple of weeks to save some money to get a plane ticket back to San Diego and I boarded this American Airline and sat down on a three seats and 2 elderly women were sitting with me and as the plane was waiting on the tarmac ah, one of the women opened the Times and there it said, the headline said "Civil Rights Worker Slain" and my heart stopped and there in the first paragraph was the story of Jon being shot, of Richard being shot and so I started crying and ah, these women asked me what was the matter and ah, I'm really grateful for those 2 gals because I was able to ah, unload a lot of grief on that flight, on that 5 hour flight with them and I shared with them about my summer and told them about Jon, you know.....ah, tothat's one reason why I'm here in Keene today is ah, I still have a littel grieving to do and the people who I'm here with, Gloria and Richard and Ruby and others that loved and knew Jon ah, I just need to be around them to complete this ah, the bit of grieving that's been going on for 25 years ah, I, until last night, this is the first time I've been with anyone who knew him since I left Selma. I had a few hours with Jon Morris when he came to San Diego to interview me and that was it. So just sharing these remembrances is emotionally really good for me, you know, because ah, I've just felt kind of incomplete on this issues all these years.

RM: Marc, you mentioned ah, and might want to say something about the effort to ah, give Jon a special place within the episcopalian church.

O: Yes that's ah, that's something that's evolved over the last few months and one of the things that has initiated it was that Bill and Larry, you guys doing this remembrance, his 25th anniversary along with the dedication of the Icon at EDS has moved some of us within the church to ah, pass resolutions at diocese and conventions preparing for the Episcopal NATIONAL Convention in Pheonix in the summer of 91, the summer of 92, excuse me, to ah, have Jon recognized because he already is a martyr and a saint in my book but to be recognized in his church for his gifts and to be ah, given all the due propers put on the calender considered a modern day martyr and saint within the church. A militant saint as he'd like to say.

RM: I was told by and Episcoplian priest is that one of the challenges is that ah, August 20th is already occupied by St, Bernard so that ah, in terms of who get honored what day that Bernard might be tough to bump.

O: Well ah, I don't take it for granted that this gathering is kind of happening in all St's time ah, I didn't make it through church last Sunday without crying and thinking about Jon singing all those all St.'s hymns, you know.

S: Did you have a special tie to Jon because of um, you religious ah,

O: Yes we did. It was a bond ah, Jon wasn't thrilled, you

know, about getting a 19 year old attached to him. He was a mover and a shaker and he was about it and I think he, he did it just out of respect. He took me in just out of respect for John Morris and ESCRU, but ah, initially he wasn't thrilled to have me there. I think in time I was of service to him which is what I saw my role as. I was able to drive, I was a good driver and ah, I weighted about ah, 210 and in a pinch, that could have come in handy um, and I also wasn't particularly non-violent. He was better at that than I was ah, but bother being episcopalians, both being ESCRU members ah, made us close, ah, you know, having Gloria there as an ESCRU member ah,was great, you know, not an ESCRU member an episcopalian. You know, we were a small club but we were there.

S: Is there anything um, other than ah, the religious and um, intellectual side of Daniels that could explain how he bonded so well with so many different kinds of people ah, local people, ah, people like yourself um, people on the other side?

O: He was a very cool customer. He ah, he kept his wits about him, he was really sharp ah, when the, when people got emotional he kept his cool um.....I only saw him lose his cool once or twice but ah, he was ah, he had inner discipline about him. He knew what he was doing, ah, he was really great to work with because you always felt that there was someone very competent ah, you're working with. He could express himself very well ah, he was difficult for the other side to deny. He always had on that round collar with the black seminarian, senior seminarian line in it which was the first one I'd seen and I've only seen a couple since and my heart stops every time I see one of those lines um, you know, his credential, his academic credentials and so forth, gave him a lot of clout, you know, it was hard for the white people of Selma to deny him even though he incents them also. It's difficult for that southern mentality at that time to believe that a white person could be doing what we were doing. They could some how understand and justify ah, black activism but they could not figure out what we were doing or why.

S: Because?

O: It just didn't compute.

RM: One ah, kind of comment on that as to Jon's background, I think ah, growing up in Keene which a community where you can pretty well know a lot of divers people and growing up as the son of a doctor who'd be a public person, that I think Jon developed social skills um, perhaps intuitively that just stood him in very good ??? and would have had he, were he alive today in terms of ministerial or other work he might have chosen to do. It's a tribute, I think, to where he grew up and to his family, that he had those gifts.

S: How about a humna side, funny, joke

O: Funny, witty, smart, intelligent, sharp, he was a character. He ah, one night um, the hot movie of that summer starred ah, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton and was called Sandpiper

L: You me to turn on the machine and tell the story

S: Sure

L: Might as well, it will give me some practice, I haven't used this in a while.

RM: Is that a Fisk?

L: Doesn't it look like a Fisk, it's a Rosewood Handle, I bought this from a, is you're cough going to be a problem.

JS: No, it's just, right at that moment

L: Okay

RM: Do you want a glass of water

JS: No I already got some thanks

GH: We've supplied her with cough drops and water

RM: Do you want one next to you, a glass of water?

JS: I'll be alright thanks

L: Might as well get the story on tape.....(BEEP)

S: Go ahead Marc

O: Okay, ah, this is an interesting story about how Jon operated ah, I don't know whether things like this were planned or preconceived or what but we're over at the West's house one evening and the hot movie of that summer was Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in a movie called Sandpiper, just happened to be about the downfall of an episcopal priest, Elizabeth could do that to almost anybody probably but it happened to be one of us and there's always a lot of publicity and anyway, it was the hot movie. So Jon suggests that we go to the movie and I believe that it was a couple of the older West daughters and Ruby and Jon and I, were going to go to the movie. Great! It all sounded like a great idea. We pull up, and we park the little red VW almost in front of the theater parking place and out we jump as an integrated group on a Saturday night and ah, it's very busy and ah, we were s'all a little uncomfortable being a integrated group, downtown, Saturday night, might have been Friday night. It's been a long time and ah, we buy our tickets and we go in the lobby and we start to head upstairs to black section. Jon says, "Downstairs" I said, "Jon.... you know, come on ah, the place is going to be packed. We don't want to sit downstairs" He says, "we're sitting downstairs" the young West girls thought it was a great idea, you know, that we were impromptuidly going to integrate the theater here in Selma and ah, of course I'm scared to death and Jon leads the way down the isle. He finds a row about half way down and he goes in followed by the 3 gals and me at the isle. We start hearing a few calls and pretty soon, ah, one of the ushers comes down and asks us to leave and Jon said, "We're not leaving. We bought a ticket, we're admitted, we're staying." So I'm kind of looking around and the row in front of us clears out, the row behind us clears out and I knelt down in front of the gals and I looked at Jon and I said, "Jon, we've got to leave this theater before this movies over. Do that for me at least. Let's leave this theater early. Everybody agree?" Everybody agrees, great. So we, the movies starts and poor Richard Burton succombs to Elizabeth and the next thing you know, the end, the lights go and we had forgotten to get up and leave early, we were so entranced by the movie. And now we're walking out and ah, I expect a scene and ah, we got into the lobby and one of the West girls decides she wants to get some popcorn and stops at the counter for a second to buy some popcorn and now the whole

lobby is filling and staring and a few calls hear and there. She gets her popcorn and we run, and we get in the car and now the car had been blocked on the street side. Jon took the wheel, drove up on the sidewalk, down the sidewalk in front of the theater, down the alley and off we went and ah, that was a hair raising evening. I don't know if he had planned to integrate that theater when he talked about going to the movie. I hadn't given it a thought but that's the kind of thing he was capable of. He took all opportunities and maximized them.

L: Cut, that was a long take but we got it.

S: Good, I was just wondering too, before we talk to Richard and Gloria, that whole business of taking those risks, you said it's kind of risky um, I was just wondering um, what allowed him to do that, where you or I or most poeple would, you know,

GH: That's the existential question

O: That is the existential question, absolutely,

GH: Why are some people capable of those acts of heroism, you come here equiped.

O: I think it's got to come from faith. Faith, no matter what, even the consequences.

GH: I think that Jon very early understood that ah, well I think he must have processed the whole question of death very, very early and decided there was nothing he had to fear. There's no other way of explaining how he moved through those,

O: I agree with you.

GH: There's no other way to explain it.

O: I wasn't there, you know, i was, I had not processed that, you know, I was nervous. We would, we'd be coming out of Lowndes County at night and, he'd say, "Okay, get ready to duck" I went "Oh man", you know, and there's a car that would come up behind us and start to pass, we'd all go down, he'd let up on the gas and the 2 cars would pass and up we'd come.

S: But it';s still a creepy ride.

O: It's a creepy ride out there.

S: We stayed in Montgomery so we were commuting and going back and forth and we got a sense of what a ride that must have been around there.

GH: I'm anxious to speak with his sister because I'm convinced that he must have exhibited traits as a child that you, know, would have explained how he behaved as a child. These things just don't happen overnight. You don't go to Selma and discover this particular capacity. The cpacity was there all along and certainly his family knew there was something special about this person.

O: I wondered, I've gone over it and over it, Richard I don't know, if you thought where it might have come from.

RM: I'm told he was very interested in theater and persons that he used to do acts of a hundred hats, you know, that he'd keep under the front porch and his mother enjoyed this ah, telling of that and ah, and he did some of that. I suppose the part I always found somewhat curious was his going to VMI and not only going there but succeeding there very well, you know, being valedictorian of his class in military school. I'm told that that was, that he often

thought and acted contrary to what people expected. That that was part of it as well.

O: Well you know, he is a very fascinating character, you know, I thought that maybe some of that courage came out of that military school, how men walk into battle fearlessly ah,

GH: Certainly, exciting, well if I can't get out of this place I'll drive the volkswagon on the sidewalk, how many poeple would just get in the car and decide to do that. (Laughs)

RM: But crazy teenagers would do that sort of thing, you know, and in Cicago and in the suburbs it seems to me as well as in,

GH: Yes, but they would do it while their lives were not in danger just to be crazy, but this was to get out of danger.

O: It was the only option, there was a taxi that had blocked us in and ah, we knew we were in a dangerous spot. We were an integrated group there in an all white crowd of young people and, you know, we had done what we, what Jon had meant for us to do there and it was time for us to get out of there and he took that only option.

RM: Was there a sizable black population in the ah, in the balcony that night?

O: Yes

RM: Could you have had any support from, from those as you were leaving/

O: Possibly

GH: Wasn't there even a seperate entrance, didnt you leave the theater from the top without even,

O: Yes you could. I didn't see any black faces and believe me, in those days, you looked for them. That was an odd thing that happened to me as a white person how you begin to change ah, you see black faces as good and white faces as evil. Ah, black faces were trusting and loving, white faces were dangerous and angry and ah, there's a transition that goes on inside of you after a time down there and as I left the south, as I left Selma, going to see relatives in Atlanta, ah, I show up in Atlanta and I wasn't a civil rights worker any more. I was a relative of white people and these white people came out to hug me and welcome me and I was, it ah, I hadn't quite shifted gears yet and I was looking for black faces everywhere, not white faces, and, it was a very unusual time and um,

L: I felt that way in Selma this summer. I felt ???

O: I felt comfortable in the blac community and very uncomfortable in the white community.

L: Well we interviewed those poeple at ST. Pauls we couldn't wiat to finish that, they were terrible. But we got treated right by the black people down there. Real generous with their time.

S: Yeh, one guy at the hotel when we were paying the bill said, "What are you all doing down here?" "Well, we're just driving through looking around." And he said, ah, big, burly threatening looking fellow and he said, "Oh you probably came to see Pettis Brige" and he says, "When you leave here, why don't you go to Philadelphia and look at the dam"

O: Wow

S: I mean that

L: It turned out that he was a part time cop, because we saw him later on in his uniform. So we left Selma after that.

O: It would be interesting to interview some of the police that rode into that crowd.

S: Yeh.....

L: Yeh, there's a lot to be done

S: Well, the sheriff at Fort Deposit, he was interesting, he pretty much fessed up that he was part of it but then 15 minutes later he said, "Oh no, I was out of town"

GH: They were all like that, that's the whole point, it was a conspiracy, it was so obvious that it was a conspiracy

O: It's like trying to find somebody that voted for Nixon. I mean they've all, they've vanished.

L: Well Bill, can you think of another take we should do or ah,

S: Let's do Gloria first,

L: All right, because we can always skip around. Now we used 177 feet of this 400 feet um, on that very interesting story, I just want you to know that the magnum's about half empty. Okay, well why don't we flip the tape over. Just let that run Jill.

S: You have to do it this way, because the ??? and the whole thing

Tape Goes Off, End Of Marc Oliver Interview