

Atlanta Student Movement Project
Morris Dillard Interview
Conducted by Jeanne Law Bohannon
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Interviewer: I want to thank you for being here with us Mr. Dillard um, you were one of the original brain trust, the folks who changed history as students, as young people. And so I wanted to start, if you, if you would just tell us a little bit about you, where you were born, uh, where you went to school, uh, before you got to ITC.

Morris Dillard: Morehouse.

Interviewer: I'm sorry, to Morehouse.

DILLARD: I was born and raised in central Alabama to rural community, a place called Louver in Alabama, farming community. I went to high school; We called them if they were black schools, we called them training schools. I went to Crenshaw County training school. Um, most of my teachers had completed their undergraduate work at Alabama State College, no university Tuskegee Institute now to a university. Um, but my biology teacher approached me in my senior year as we approached graduation about the possibility of coming to Morehouse. I had never heard of Morehouse, did not know anybody who had attended Morehouse. Um, but for some reason he thought that Morehouse would be a good fit for me, although he was from Alabama state and, uh, Morehouse was offering a small scholarship and the opportunity to work, uh, to pay expenses and uh, I discussed it with my parents and after much debate because I was needed on the farm, it was decided that I would leave the farm and go to Morehouse. So in 1955 I came to Morehouse, as a freshmen and met Dr. Mays, Dr. Benjamin. Elijah Mays an incredible, extraordinary man who had a, perhaps after my mother and father, the greatest influence on my life. The environment in which I had grown up was a rigidly segregated environment, segregated along racial lines, at an early age you learn your place and you stayed in your place or you risked bodily harm and even death. So my parents taught us to stay in our place. They was uncomfortable about that, but it was what we were supposed to do. And so we did it and we lived.

Interviewer: Do you think your parents did that out of fear for you? They were afraid for you?

DILLARD: Afraid for, for all of us, they were afraid for, for us, the children for themselves. There were ample examples of what happened to, to black people who did not stay in that place. Uh, we were constantly reminded of the risk and the cost of getting out of your lane. But, uh, when I came to Morehouse, Dr. Mays had organized the college around the notion that black people were are just as good as white people and that it was his job to convince us of that fact above all else, to teach us science and mathematics literature or to teach us most of all that we were equal, that there was nothing we couldn't do, indeed we couldn't do better than anybody else if we applied ourselves. That all of the stuff that we had been taught about inferiority was, was bogus. He pounded that into us every day until we came to believe it and to believe in it and to reject what we had been taught to believe in our early years. Uh, and having, having acquired this new knowledge of ourselves and the question the next question obviously was, what are you going to do about it? I mean you can't, you can't live with that. You can't live with that knowledge. You can't live knowing that you are somebody else that you are not what you were told, that you... So the, so that the, the need to act was, was the logical next step. Uh, so we were ready when the opportunity presented itself.

Interviewer: And you met Lonnie King and Julian Bond and Joe Pierce.

DILLARD: I did, I did, I did. Uh, I was, Lonnie was a little older than I. He had, he had come to Morehouse, uh, a few years before I did and he had gone off to the navy. Um, he returned uh, when he returned, he and I kind of hit it off as friends. We took classes together and uh, I was moving into the, the mid, mid years of my college career and was at about the same point as a returning student. So he and I grew close and I knew what he was thinking about when he started talking about organizing the Atlanta student movement.

Interviewer: What did you major in at Morehouse?

DILLARD: I majored in French. I, I, um, uh, that was not my initial plan. Uh, my mother wanted me to be a doctor, uh, but, uh, as most, as I suspect most students do, they explore a lot of career options from there at the undergraduate level. Uh, I, uh, this is another important factor in my, in my journey. Uh, I was fortunate

enough to receive a, a travel study, grant while at Morehouse and spent a year abroad, a year in Europe. Most of that time was spent in France, in Paris. Um, that opened my eyes and that was the purpose of the, of the grant, quite frankly, it was to go abroad, uh, and see how other people live. And uh, and I, I did.

And that was, that was a completely new experience for me to be around people from all over the world who saw me as, as another human being. And I felt comfortable in that environment, believe it or not. Although I had, I had grown up in a segregated, racially-segregated environment. That training, that deep programming that I had gone through, the leadership of Dr. Mays at Morehouse and the first two, three years of my college career had prepared me to be receptive to a more open environment in Europe.

Interviewer:

You traveled on your study abroad and you came back. Is that when she's helped me understand the time period, a little bit. So when you came back from France, was that when you, was that in 1960?

DILLARD:

I came back to Morehouse in 1958, just before the student movement kicked off. But things were beginning to, to, to happen on a nationwide basis. A change was in the air. I mean the, the Montgomery bus boycott was very much, uh, on the, on the front pages of the newspapers, uh, during that period of time. So, when I came back, I came back to a nation, a country, a region, the south that was what things were beginning to happen.

Interviewer:

Did your time abroad, especially, so being in France, being abroad and having equality be the norm and then having to come back...

DILLARD:

Very difficult, very difficult adjustment.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

DILLARD:

This adjustment period was long and tough for me. Uh, I acquired, quite frankly, it happened as we got off the boat in New York and boarded a greyhound bus for Atlanta, and uh when I boarded the bus, I was able to sit wherever I wanted to sit to in New York when we, we got to Kentucky. Um, that's when I faced the color line and had to move to the back of the bus and that's when the pain of segregation hit me. So having lived a year doing pretty much what I wanted to do, how I

wanted to do it, where I want it to do it, with whom I wanted to do it. Having gone through that for a year and all of a sudden having to readjust to that pre-Morehouse period where I had to stay in my place growing up as a, as a youngster, uh, that, that was hard for me to accept. In fact, I never did. It was, it was too late. I mean, I, it was, it was, it was too late. I had, I had been converted if you please. Uh, I was ready.

Interviewer: So that your trip abroad really helped you?

DILLARD: No question about it, not question about it, I can't go back to That.

Interviewer: So, let's flash forward to the fall of 1960.

DILLARD: Okay

Interviewer: The Rich's sit-in was October nineteenth.

DILLARD: Okay.

Interviewer: Can you talk and not even just about Rich's because of a lot of people I think talk about Rich's, but when, when normally when Norma June came in and, and, and, and we were able to talk with her over the summer, she said, you know, I don't think a lot of people realize there sit-ins every day and that Rich's just happened to be the flashpoint, the big one, but there were sit-ins going on at Woolworth's and at Walgreens, and at all these different places. Um, can you talk a little bit about that environment of the students from your perspective as a student, as a young man who was, who was in the midst of it and creating this change?

DILLARD: Well, to begin with, you need to understand that we had, we had a lot of students to work with. I mean we're talking five to 7,000 students in the Atlanta University Center, most of whom felt the same way that I felt they had grown up pretty much the same way I felt. They had grown up in a segregated society but had gone through a period of deprogramming where they came to know themselves as human beings are equal to other human beings capable of doing whatever they applied themselves to. So they were ready. We had 6,000 troops. So, so the application of simple organization principles led us to the realization that we had, we, we had resources and therefore we had, we had options. We did not need to focus on, on one location, one company, one store or one restaurant that we organized

ourselves we could, we could attack the whole city. And that's kinda where we looked at it. We looked at it from a, from a military point of view, I guess, although, although Lonnie was one of the, one of the few students who had military experience, um, but we organized along military lines. We created a group in a group A, group B, and Group C; and group A went here in Group B and we, we establish communications between headquarters in those groups. And, and, uh, we had, we had a strategy that we used for Rich's that was different from the strategy that we use for city hall. Uh, so, um, so it was, it was, it was, and this was probably unique to the Atlanta movement uhm, It was duplicated later on by others. But, um, we, we were perhaps one of the, one of the best organized students sit in movements in the, in the country at the time, uh, because because we having all of those resources and uh, having, having the leadership that we had available to us, we were able to put that, put all those students together in a way and deploy them in a way that, that created a, created a momentum in its own right that the city had to deal with. And the business community realized that we weren't just a flash in the pan here that we're dealing with, with something that's pretty serious.

Interviewer:

Um, then then Dr. Moss had spoken with us earlier and it just hit me just now this idea of organization that you talked about as well, that since the Atlanta student movement, there hasn't really been a group of folks struggling for civil rights who have been able to replicate the amazing just the Organization of day today who goes where? Not to mention the organization of not just the blankets, right? But the legal and the economic side of this entire meeting.

DILLARD:

That may be true, I, I don't presume to know everything that, that went on a national but, but certainly among, among students, I think we probably were unique in that regard. Um, and that's when I did one of the reasons I believe we were so effective, uh, we, we came to realize that, that we had a lot of options and that and that we couldn't do if one thing didn't work, that we could try something else and keep the, keep the movement going at once. It's kind of like driving a big Mac truck up a hill and you get to the top of the hill it's, it's, it's, it's virtually impossible to stop it. We knew that. We sense that.

Interviewer:

So you were, um, I, I, uh, Lonnie wanted me to make sure that I asked you about the big fundraiser that you coordinated with those Christmas cards and that was part of the organization as well. I've been trying so hard to find those original cards and I haven't been able to. I know A.U. center has one on display and I haven't been. They do, as part of the Atlanta student movement, does the exhibit, they've got center, but how as a youngster, how did you affect that? How was that done in 1960?

DILLARD:

That was, uh, that was, uh, it was, it was an idea that grew out of it, a decision to turn the movement away from, from just day to day demonstrations, sit-ins if you please protests to something that was more economic base. In other words, we decided that, that we might get a better result if we, if we applied economic pressure to the, uh, retail establishments downtown in the metro area. Um, so we call for a boycott at Christmas boycott of stores and that's where Rich's came, became when became one of the prime targets because Rich's was huge. Was the largest department store in the region. It was big. Christmas was big at Rich's. Um, so our focus was on Rich's um, but the idea was to, was to discourage, um, uh, the whole community from shopping during the holiday season. And we, and we especially call on old black folk in Atlanta, not to shop during the Christmas holidays to show their support for the demands of the students. And um, so we haven't told them. I asked them not to do something. The question then became, what do you, what do you offer, what are you offering in lieu of then somebody came up with the idea of let's, uh, let's design and sell Christmas cards, a black oriented Christmas cards. And uh, there were students who had talent, graphic arts who came up with designs and uh, we were fortunate enough to find someone willing to donate the printing services and all we needed to do was to develop the outlets for the distribution of those cards. So the sale and distribution of those cards. And that's, that's what I did. We, we didn't need a lot of money, but we needed some money to run the student movement. We didn't need a lot of money because we, the manpower was free students volunteered their services and that's our biggest need. Um, they, the adults in the community, many adults in the community want it to get involved and they contributed a food and stuff like that, but we still have expenses that, that, that required cash and uh, so we, we needed to generate, we generate some cash and the, and the sale or the greeting cards are provided to one source of income for the, the just normal

expenses of running a major organization. And that's what we became. We became a major organization that Atlanta committed on, on the appeal for human rights, became a major organization

Interviewer:

So, and out of that immense knowledge and activist spirit. Those folks then transitioned into the NAACP and really kind of changed the outlook of that organization. Right?

DILLARD:

Well, just the, the, the, the leadership, the leadership of the Atlanta student movement, it should be said or sacrificed a great deal. It was, it was, I mean, you, you, uh, you, you had to postpone your studies. Uh, so you didn't graduate on time. Uh, some of, some of the leaders had fabulous at young families. So they began to, in the mid-sixties, in the mid, mid-sixties, they began to, to ask themselves what am I going to do with the rest of my life? And so some of us began the process of starting a careers and uh, some of us left Atlanta went when he went off to graduate schools or others went off, took jobs outside of the city. But towards the end of the sixties, we, uh, we began to come back to Atlanta for a variety of reasons and we kind of looked around and said, oh my God, what we worked for and achieved in the early sixties. It looks like, you know, we're going in reverse here that we didn't consolidate our gains. So what are we going to do about it? Uh, we worked hard. Some of us took a lot of blows. Many of us went to jail. Uh, so what, what shall we do? And the question became, do we or do we, do we start a new organization, tried to revive the Atlanta student movement, or do we look at existing civil rights organizations and move in and, and join up with them? Then we decided on a lot of course of action and then the NAACP became that. And uh, it was, it was kind of ripe for takeover if you believe and we ran, we ran the candidates for president and for the executive board of the NAACP and our candidates were successful. London became the president of the NAACP. Some of us were elected to the executive board and so that we were in control of an established civil rights organization that needed only new energy, uh, and, and, and new direction and a, for the next year or so, starting in the, in 67, 68, uh, we use the NAACP to renew the attack on, uh, on, on segregation and discrimination in, in, in metropolitan Atlanta. Uh, and that, uh, and, and, and we discovered that it was, it was worse than we thought. We had only scratched the surface. And in 1960, um, are getting their right to, to sit, uh, sit in at a, uh, at a restaurant or lunch counter was, was, was just the tip of the iceberg, or we hit not really, um, a dismantle the system of

segregation as we, we, we might have, might have thought we had a. So one of the things that we decided to do on the auspices of the NAACP was to take a look at the media, the radio, television, newspapers, uh, as, as a, as a, as an industry, an institution if you please, that was having an extraordinary impact on, on, on the lives of black folk in Atlanta. And the reason was quite simple is it, is that, uh, you did not have a, uh, blacks in the decision making positions in the radio and television stations and other communities, some of the communities had, had, had also begun to, to a poke around in the media, uh, and, and, and to see if, if some, some changes could not be brought about through the process of challenging the renewal of the FCC licenses. Radio and television stations require a federal license in order to broadcast over the airways. And, uh, so I'll never forget lunch at the president of the NAACP fell ill and was in the hospital and I had been appointed the executive director of the local branch of the NAACP working for Lonnie, And uh, he went to see him in the hospital on Saturday afternoon and he was reading the newspaper and he says, Morris, I want you to write a letter to all of the radio and television stations and inviting them to a meeting. We want to talk to them about the renewal of the license. And I says, what do you want to do that? And he says, uh, we, we are not getting a fair, we're not getting fair treatment in the media and we're going to challenge them on, on the grounds that we are not being fairly treated in the media. And I said, Lonnie, we can't do that. They are friends because to be, to be sure we had relied on the media during the heyday of the student movement to provide a certain measure of protection for us. But because, uh, when you, when you go out there, uh, you don't know what to expect. And, uh, you're much more likely to, to come out, uh, uh, with your, with your life if, if the bright lights of the television of focused on what you're doing. So, so we had gotten pretty decent coverage by the Atlanta television stations and newspapers, um, during the, during the early sixties. Uh, so I kinda resisted but he insisted. And so I wrote the letter, he signed it and we sent it to every radio and television station in metropolitan Atlanta whose license was up for renewal. Uh, actually we sent it to everybody that we didn't know whose license was up for renewal at the time. Uh, and uh, and uh, we got some calls saying, who are you to threaten us coming? So we say, see? Lonnie said, well, just this to the meeting is set. We'll see. We'll see who shows up. And then to my surprise, on the day of the meeting, all of them showed up. They all came and we laid out our demands, if he please. And that's what they were. And we said that this is what has been happening in terms

of your treatment of the black community and, uh, this is what we think needs to happen. And, uh, we'd like to sit down and then go see agreements with you individually to achieve what we think is, is fair treatment. And, um, and we created what we call the broadcast coalition, uh, headed by the NAACP, but involved in several organizations in the community because we needed a lot of manpower to actually negotiate these agreements, came up with the form agreement for radio stations, television stations, and sent out teams of, of, of, of negotiators to each of these, uh, stations and actually negotiated foreman agreements whereby they committed to do one, two, three, four, five, six in terms of, uh, own their personnel in terms of a, behind the camera people in terms of reporters, in terms of, uh, in terms of, of, getting the news, um, and, and that sort of thing in those, those agreements were actually, uh, actually implemented now to be sure, uh, as I look back on that experience, it was a great achievement by the way, at the time. All of a sudden, you see, you see black faces showing up on your evening, Evening News, News, uh, uh, you know, that they are black assignment editors. And, uh, but, but that was something that we, we, we missed, quite frankly. Uh, we didn't, we didn't establish a monitoring system whereby the content of the broadcasts could be evaluated on an ongoing basis and, uh, and feedback provided to the stations because I believe that, uh, many of the owners and managers of those stations out of spite and ill will a retaliated by showing that the, that the, the, the black side of the black community, even to this day, I think that, um, the, the, the, the, the, uh, I don't know how to put it other than to just say that the negative aspects of what goes on in the black community is projected and the news in programming and programming. Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely. They, even today, uh, and I, and I traced that to that period when we, we achieved our objective, but we didn't, we didn't follow through, um, to ensure that, that the real change that we saw was brought about a, that's a, that's a regret that I still maintain that we're going to have to do something about, about, I think the media is having a, uh, it's having a, a, a negative effect on, on, uh, on, on the growth, and development of the younger generation, people were not paying enough to that.

Interviewer:

So speaking of, uh, young people today is, as one of these, is one of the founding members, right? Of that this is the brain trust of talent and ag advocacy and activism. Is there anything that you as a veteran of the civil rights movement, I think that the young people today need to know as they will look at the

appeal, right? And they will get some of those parts of the appeal that are still unanswered.

DILLARD:

Absolutely. I'd say the number one, but you have to understand that all that glitters ain't gold. That we still face some major problems in this country in terms of, um, in terms of what's important, what's not important in terms of the quality of life in our, in our communities and our neighborhoods. The unevenness of life in general. You've got these six extraordinary gaps between Group A and Group B, and I don't believe that can, that can be sustained. Uh, so, so we, we need to give attention to the fundamentals of a social order to ensure that it is, that the fundamentals are solid and does the social order can be sustained. And, and that happens when people first of all acknowledge that there are problems. Secondly, commit to join forces to attack those problems. And, and third, that they, they act in good faith and unselfishly. I mentioned earlier that those of us who were involved in the student movement in the early sixties were w we, we, we sacrificed a lot. I mean, we gave up a lot. Uh, I, I, I, I sometimes think what might have been if I had not a what, what might have, if Lonnie had not given so much of himself. Um, what, what might he be today? A, somebody that had to give up something. You just can't, you can't do all of that. And, and, and enjoy the good life. You can't, you've got to, you got to give up something. So somebody has got to step up and say, I will, I'll give up something, I'll, you know, I'll, I'll sacrifice a career objective. I'll sacrifice a good job here. I know, you know, and offer that and that, that happens. That happens. Um, older people change, bringing about change is a, is a, is a task that old people can support, but I maintain, do not do well in a leadership position. It requires too much energy. And if there's one thing that older people generally speaking, I'm speaking generally lack is, we just don't have the, that kind of energy. We have the will, we, we want to do it, but we just don't have the energy we need young people with a lot of energy will willingly spend hours, hours, you know, hours and hours, you know, banging at it banging at it banging at it because it ain't going away. It's not, it's not going to give in without, without, uh, without a fight.

Interviewer:

I want to thank you for spending time with us today, Mr. Dillard, and I'm sure that I am going to ask you again. I'm going to come back to the well again and ask you to sit with me and with us and with Lonnie and talk about some of the possibilities for young people.

DILLARD: I'd be happy to do it.

Interviewer: Thank you very much.

DILLARD: Sure thing.