

Atlanta Student Movement Project
Dr. Otis Moss, Jr. Interview
Conducted by Jeanne Law Bohannon
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Transcribed by Jourdan Hunter and Victoria James

JB: So, I'm here today with um, one of the members of the Atlanta student movement brain trust and I'd like to talk with you today on anything that you feel like we're not covering and you would like to cover, just feel free to, to talk about it. And um, but I wanted to start with you telling me just a little bit about you. So, where you were born, when, where you went to school?

OM: I grew up in a country setting, a rural setting a few miles out from Lagrange, Georgia. The addressed post office, was Lagrange, Georgia. I often identified, identified as Troupe County because I really didn't live in the city, proper and there is a back story to that as well. On a farm, my father was a farmer, a sharecropper who also worked for the WPA, which was a part of the Roosevelt Administration's Recovery Program during the Great Depression. And in my home, there was a beautiful atmosphere of support from my father and mother. Unfortunately, our mother died when we were all quite young. I was four years old. My younger brother was seven months old and three sisters who are not yet teenagers. My father then became the single parent of five children. He never remarried. When I was 16. My father was killed in an automobile accident, not too far from where we lived. And for a year, I was a junior in high school, and for a year I lived with neighbors. And that's how it got into my autobiography or biography that I was often that age of 16, technically that's not accurate. I simply lived with neighbors during my senior year in high school and then went off to Morehouse and Morehouse college became my home.

JB: What happened with your siblings? Where do they live?

OM: My siblings, as each one graduated from elementary school, which was the seventh grade, moved to the city, lived with a relatives and continued high school because my younger brother was so young when my mother passed,

my father's sister, who lived about 10 miles away, became his surrogate mother, so we went back and forth to visit and to bond with him in the house of my aunt who was my father's sister. And, unfortunately, he was never able to actually move back into the house, uh, because of the care system my father was working, so there was no one to care for him at home. So, my father would pack us up, get a bus once per month, and we were all gathered at my aunt's home and it became a family affair.

JB: That's interesting. And your father worked for the WPA? The WPA. What did they actually do?

OM: They prepared roads, they dug ditches, whatever, they were rebuilding the community, cutting canals and doing necessary work outdoors and at the same time, saving or improving or enhancing the environment.

JB: That's really interesting. So, you got to Morehouse in the late fifties, mid-fifties?

OM: Yes. 1952

JB: Two, early '50s. What was happening at Morehouse in the 1950s?

OM: Morehouse college was an exciting place. I've often said that some of my classmates and college, students, colleagues had complaints about housing and food and other things. But when I came to the Morehouse campus and found Graves Hall, the stakely, historic building, I had moved into the Taj Mahal. So, I could not fully grasp some of my classmates complaints going from a country outhouse to a shower and indoor facilities. This was a revolutionary transition, but deeper than that on a daily basis, I was in the company of young people, young men who had hopes and dreams and aspirations, who were smart, who were alert, who were reading books and papers and periodicals and our faculty that had a lifelong commitment in excellence and the development of men of Morehouse to help them become Morehouse man. Especially, our President, Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays.

OM: So everyday chapel was required if you lived on campus, not five days a week, but six days a week, Monday through Friday and Sunday morning. That's unheard of in these

times and we rebelled, but that was one chapel hour that was a chondral sin to miss and that was Tuesday morning when Dr. Mays spoke. Everybody across that period of 27 years when Dr. Mays was president of Morehouse has a story or two or three or more of that experience with Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays and what he said from that lectern, from that podium in chapel has nurtured us and challenged us for the rest of our days.

JB: So he was a mentor to you.

OM: Indeed.

JB: To all of you.

OM: Yes.

JB: What is one of the memories that you have? Or one of the stories that you could talk about with Dr. Mays?

OM: The first time I met Dr. Mays was at a high school graduation, not my high school graduation, but another high school graduation. Prior to my graduation, he was the keynote speaker. I rushed out of the auditorium, made my way to the parking lot. He had driven himself to the school and following the ceremony was headed back to Atlanta. Had a chance to shake his hand and said to him, I expect to meet you at Morehouse

JB: You were a high school student?

OM: Yes, and fast forward three or four years later, I was on the lawn of the President's home where he and Mrs. Mays and giving a reception for freshmen and I shook his hand again and reminded him all the time I had the privilege to meet him and make that kind of announcement and now I was living that. He congratulated me, but I also remember the first chapel service when he spoke to the freshmen class and he said something that can be found in the speeches of Dr. King and many others. Whatever you do, do it so well, that no one living, no one did, no one yet born, could do it any better.

OM: Reach for the stars and grasp the moon. If it falls in your lot to be a street sweeper. Sweep streets like Michelangelo carved marble, sweep streets like Langston Hughes

composed poetry. Sweep streets like Marian Anderson saying Ave Maria. Sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven will have to pause and say, here lived a great street sweeper who did his job will never allow the world to dismiss you because of a lazy or sloppy work.

JB: That was amazing, so he really inspired you and the other members of this brain trust in the movement.

OM: Absolutely

JB: There's a lot of the HBCU presidents that were afraid for you all, afraid for your lives.

OM: Yes. One of the things that Dr. Mays would say to the men of Morehouse and those who became Morehouse men never volunteer to pay for segregation. What he was dealing with was going to a segregated theatre, going up in the buzzard roost, the balcony and he was so emphatic on that, that I never went to one of those. Now, I did go, but they were theatre's in the African American community that were designated, they were segregated away from the other side of town, but there were not petitions or balconies. He also said, when you ride the bus, if you are forced by law to go to the backseat, make sure that your mind stays up front and one day your body will catch up with your mind, and that was so clear, so profound that when we witnessed the Montgomery movement led by Dr. King, a Morehouse man, the words of Dr. King or Dr. Mays were being implemented by Dr. King.

JB: I never knew that. I knew that Dr. Mays was inspiring, but I did not know that, wow.

OM: And to be in that atmosphere for 4 years and for me, 7 years because I continued in seminary for 3 more years after college for my seminary degree and then at ITC another year in special studies. So, I got to know and to work with the Lonnie Kings and Rosalyn Popes and the Maurice Dillard and the Julian Bonds just to name a few and across the street, persons like a Mama June Wilson Davis now and Marian Wright Edelman. Marianne Smith from Morris Brown. And the late Ruby Doris Smith who was in my first sit in group at the state capitol. It was a family of freedom fighters.

JB: That's amazing. So, you were the interim chair of the movement when Lonnie and Hershell went to jail that day in Richmond.

OM: A few days. It was

JB: Because there was a lot of stuff that happened, and you had to get things ready, you had to do all the communications I mean all that. So, I wanted to ask you...

OM: All right.

JB: I wanted to get started back about how you kept in communication and how you kept the movement going. In the co-chair position.

OM: All right.

JB: Is that OK to talk about?

OM: That's fine

JB: Ok. So, let's flash forward to October nineteenth, 1960.

OM: Yes.

JB: And Lonnie King and Hershell Sullivan along with other students, went to jail.

OM: Right. Mama June Wilson and Morris Dillard and so many more.

JB: And so, you then, had to become the interim chair of the movement

OM: Lonnie who was the chair and it was a dynamic fearless chair asked me to take over a period of time that they were in jail. And this is a back story because it was not, we did not hold an election. He simply asked if I would do this and I immediately agreed, the responsibilities were awesome, because I had the task of visiting the jail every day. Dr. King was in jail with them and meeting with the adult supporters in the community, it was called the Adult Student Liaison Committee and also communicating with the students on the ground who had not gone to jail and this, this kind of multiple tasks. But I was also a pastor in

South Atlanta. But, I was married and my wife, late wife, who died a few years following that was a student at Spelman. Her name was Sharon Joanne, we all called her Joann, but we had an unwritten agreement. We both participated in somewhere there are photographs of her marching on the picket line with a sign saying segregation must go, but, there was kind of an inside agreement that we would not participate in demonstrations or sit ins together because we did not want the power of nonviolence to be personally tested, in the event, that one was abused physically or otherwise. My responsibility was also to communicate beyond Atlanta in somewhere in the record, Barris, probably a telegram sent out to Roy Wilkins of the NAACP asking for nationwide support for our movement and a principled assignment, a key assignment was for me, along with a key adult supporters and other students who had not gone to jail to meet with the mayor of the city of Atlanta.

JB: I wanted to ask you about that. How you negotiated that meeting with Mayor Hartsfield?

OM: We had some demands, one, that you, Mr. Mayor, meet with immediately all of the leaders of the downtown establishments on the public, persons in charge of the public facilities, restaurants, cafeteria, etc. and began negotiations for the desegregation of all of these facilities in Atlanta, number one. Number two, we want everybody who has been arrested to be released without bail. Now the back story there was, they had made a commitment the students to go to jail without bail. So, and that was a moral commitment. So, we did not want that moral commitment broken. So, we said we want them released without bail. And interestingly enough, the Mayor agreed. He was in the meeting writing down all of the demands, he said that we can do that. And he said, I will begin negotiating with the merchants. Then we said, well, we want a report in 15 days and we will evaluate in 30 days the progress. So, all of the students were released much to their surprise and to some to their dissatisfaction, they were expecting to be in jail much, much longer. But something peculiar and unexpected and brutal happened. When we went to the jail, the county jail, to pick up all of the students unmasked, there was a deputy sheriff waiting for Dr. King from the Dekalb county. Now, the challenge here is transporting Dr. King from Fulton County jail to Dekalb county jail at night

was not a happy moment. The sheriff of Fulton County said to Dr. King, you will be safer in my jail. Dr. King spent the weekend in Fulton County jail. Everybody was disappointed. We felt responsible because Lonnie and others had invited him. He was getting ready to go to Nigeria, at the invitation of the first independent President, of the invitation of Nigeria. Here he was in jail, Mrs. King expecting, Co-Pastor of Ebenezer. Everybody is released and now Dr. King is in jail by himself. Monday morning, they picked him up from the Fulton County jail and handcuffed him, transported him to Dekalb County. He had a team of great lawyers, but, the judge, Oscar Mitchell looked down from the bench at Attorney Hollowell, the late attorney Hollowell, while he was making a point in the case and said, how much more time is this going to take, got a fishing trip coming up, all of this is in the midst of the trial. Another piece of backstory, Dr. Samuel Williams, a professor of philosophy and religion at Morehouse was in the courtroom and was arrested because he didn't move fast enough when the God asked him to move. All of these dynamics have taken place.

OM: The judge sentenced Dr. King four months... Four to six months hard labor on public works, which meant Georgia Chain Gang.

JB: Way down in Reidsville, right?

OM: Before the lawyers could appeal the judge's decision, the next morning somewhere between 2 and 4 a.m., they put chains on his body, handcuffed him, put him in the prison wagon, and drove 230 miles across the state to the Reidsville Prison where the electric chair was housed. And here he was for the first time, alone in jail, cut off from the community, and things began to happen. There are two things that ought to be remembered, I think. The letter that Dr. King wrote to Mrs. King, Coretta Scott King. I have used it for many years. Everybody ought to read that first letter from a jailhouse before Birmingham. However, there was an intervention on the part of then Senator Kennedy and his brother Robert Kennedy. Now, Senator John F. Kennedy who was running for president in a tight race, called Mrs. King, as the record shows, and Robert Kennedy called the judge. And the judge released Dr. King. Shortly thereafter, we had a community wide mass meeting at Ebenezer Baptist Church, and that's when daddy king, Dr.

Martin Luther King Sr., and Reverend Abernathy speaking at that mass meeting. I was there and said to the people “I had endorsed Nixon.” I was very honest because I didn't think a Catholic ought to be president. And then he raised his voice, “But!” I have never been able to write so well that I didn't need an eraser from pen. And then he went on to say he was changing his endorsement as of that moment and he was going to get all the votes he could get and put them in the hands, or the laps, I think he said. The lap of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Dr. Abernathy followed him and said, “it's time to throw away all of the Nixon buttons and lift up Senator Kennedy.” When the meeting was over, there were papers lined up and down Auburn Avenue. They were Nixon signs and handouts. And, of course, the story is that Kennedy won by about 113,000 votes. Someone figured it out and said he won by less than one half vote per precinct, but that was not an accident. A Flyer was prepared, endorsed by ministers across the country. African American ministers. Someone said they printed 11,000,000 copies. Pretty fantastic for 1960. They were distributed in Atlanta, Cleveland, Chicago, New York, Detroit St. Louis, San Francisco, L.A., and all of the major urban centers and American church. In every church. So, I maintain without any fear of successful contradiction that Dr. King elected President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson, 1960 November election.

JB: And so, if we take that line back: you, Lonnie, Herschel, Roslyn, Julian, the Atlanta Student Movement...

OM: The Atlanta Student Movement changed the history of our nation from the office of President on down. The Atlanta Student Sit-In Movement played a key role in the presidential election of 1960. And if one wanted to be bold, we could say that our movement elected the president of the United States in 1960. Now, many people do not want to write that or say it, but history is a swift witness. But that's something else here. Unfortunately, President Kennedy was assassinated. President Johnson, Vice President Johnson, succeeded him. In 1964, Lyndon Baines Johnson was the candidate running opposite of Senator Goldwater. He was elected by a landslide. So, our movement elected two presidents within four years. And when President Carter ran for president, he was standing on the shoulders of our movement coming out of Georgia. Plains, Georgia. So, Dr. King and the movement, the city

and movement in this brief moment in history, elected three presidents. Fast forward to the 90s, the 1990s. President William Jefferson Clinton stood on the shoulders of the leadership and the foundation laid by the movement created through the works of Dr. King and students. So, our movement elected a fourth president. I'm not saying that the Atlanta Movement alone, but I'm talking about collectively.

JB: But it was, it was the students. Young people who came together.

OM: Yes, absolutely. And now fast forward. Now, we are parents and grandparents. Fast forward to 2008. And when we see President Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States of America. All of these links are connected. They're not in isolation. And in spite of all of the difficulties, the Atlanta Student Movement is still writing history.

JB: Well. So, I had some other questions, but I'm not exactly sure... Dr. Moss, my goodness. So, I also heard from some of your fellow civil rights veterans that you knew a lot about the founding of Snick because Snick was part of. So, all of these groups have this adult student liaison committee. The Atlanta Student Movement, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Corps. All of these monumental groups were all coming out of this same brain trust of folks.

OM: The best person to give you the back story of this would be our friend, Lonnie King. Dr. King and SCLC see funded the meeting for the founding of Snick. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which brought together all of the sit-in principles. The various HBCUs and representatives thereof. And persons like Lonnie King, Maurice Dillard, the late Ruby Doris Smith and Herschel Sullivan. Marian Wright Edelman, Julian Bond, and Dr. Maryanne Smith and Ruby Doris Smith. Just to name a few, became a vital part of the creation of Snick. I did not go to the founding meeting. Reverend A.D. Williams, King, and myself went to various business people in Atlanta to solicit funds to help finance the trip to North Carolina where Snick was founded. And the first south wide or Southeast major conference after the founding was held in Atlanta. One of the keynote speakers was the late Lillian Smith. I should

never forget her address. She talked about trying to build a nation with worn out confederate bills. Money. And she gave the story of discovering, along with her brother, a trunk in their back yard as children that had been buried for years, while doing the child's treasure hunt. Children's treasure hunt. And they somehow came across this trunk that was filled with confederate money. And each one grabbed a handful of the money and ran to the store for the first time they were going to buy all the candy and whatever that they wanted. And the gentleman at the store said, "you can't use this." So, her brother ran back to the house, to the trunk, and got an arm full of confederate money. And the man had to explain to him that this money is of no value. "You cannot buy any goods here." And she said, "we cannot buy a future with discredited confederacy, confederate bills." Some people are today trying to recreate the future of America on confederate money. Confederate money mixed with Neo-Nazi currency, and I wish that our president could understand that this is a dead currency and we need a living spirit and ideals and principles and moral presuppositions to build a future for our children and our children's children.

JB: I wanted to ask you too before, before we end. You all put your bodies on the line in 1916. And in 2017, we are having to do that again. As a mentor and a reverend and a leader, what would be a piece of advice you would give to young people who want to resist and who want to make sure that our future is not based off of confederate bills?

OM: Two or three things, I think in communicating with our children and our children's children: In order to participate effectively in transformation, preparation is absolutely necessary. It is empty rhetoric to talk about revolution without preparation. Preparation precedes transformation, and a part of that preparation must be some understanding of history. Of the past without getting stuck in the past. And it requires a foundation upon which you stand, move, speak, and act. That's why I hold up forever: An Appeal for Human Rights. And if anyone should read this appeal, they will discover that student leaders representing the entire Atlanta University connections develop this. And this was another thing that made our student movement unique. This document was the articulation of one: why we're going to sit-in, why we need to sit-in, and the principles upon which we stand as we sit-in. So, let us tell you, but if you don't

want to listen to us, read the document. It had such an impact that the governor of Georgia, who at that time was Ernest Vandiver, called a press conference to criticize our document and even said in the press conference, "I read that document supposedly written are purported to be written by students, but it sounds so much like the literature coming out of Moscow." Now, that was an insult, but also a boost. Why do I say that? He gave the document publicity and exposure that we did not have the resources to give. Although, the adults in the community helped us publish the document in local and national media, but he turned a special kind of beam and gave to us unintended and unexpected exposure trying to denigrate the document. He lifted it up and that's, that happens. If the cause is righteous and I believe when the principles and techniques are nonviolent, that should never be forgotten. And if you look at the five to seven points in the document, you will discover that everyone is relevant this very hour in terms of the continuing struggle. We ought to have a platform, a foundation, a moral foundation upon which we stand if we're going to be successful and fulfilling in the struggle. And from that foundation, principals ought to be articulated. That can feed, enhance, inform, and inspire generations not yet born.

JB: Welcome Dr. Moss and thank you for spending time with us and we'll come back to the well of your deep knowledge again and ask, I'm sure, to talk about some other things. One of the things that I didn't want to be remiss in saying was I read Governor Vandiver. I read the transcript of that press conference and as teacher and as a mentor to my own students, one of the things that struck me that he also said was that no college student could have written that document and that's how little he thought about the young people in Georgia in college.

OM: And when he said, "no college students," he did not realize that he had thrown a bomb of disrespect and a lack of faith in all college students.

JB: Right. And I think he could never have thought that those words that he felt were so condescending would have been so important in lifting the exact opposite of what he wanted. And he most likely didn't have a college degree himself. Did he?

OM: I think he did. So, it was really an indictment against himself.

JB: Absolutely. It absolutely was.

OM: One thing I would like to lift up has to do with the uniqueness, the preparation, and positioning of the Atlanta Student Movement. Here you have Morehouse, Spelman, Clark, Atlanta University, Maurice Brown, and the interdenominational theological center all in walking distance of each other and with Atlanta University, there was a possibility of cross registration and the interchanging of subject and faculty. No center in the world had that kind of geographical and academic positioning. Which means that you could have a young man in Morehouse with a sister at Spelman out of the same house. And you did a cousin at Maurice Brown, a mother on the faculty at Clark and a pastor at ITC. How unique. How special. And if I wanted to, you know, mount the pool pit, I would say only God can present such circumstances, but we have to grasp them and make them of them something unique and special. So, without boasting, the Atlanta Sit-In movement was unique and joining with other student movements. Quickly, Nashville had a unique period of preparation and some significant historic breakthroughs as all of the movements did, the individual movements. But no center anywhere in the world had the history, the location, and the contiguous arrangement that the student sit-in movement and Atlanta had. And that's not an overstatement or an exaggeration. It simply lifts up what can happen. One: because of. And two: in spite of.

JB: Thank you so much for spending time with us today.

OM: Thank you.

JB: I appreciate you so much. Thank you.